WEIRD

THE VERY BEST OF ALIEN WORLDS

SCI-FI TALES FROM THE EIGHTIES!

ALIEN WORLDS

CONTENTS

STORIES FROM
ALIEN WORLDS
#1-9

SPECIAL 3-D
ISSUE

MOLOCK WAS LEADER. MOLOCK WAS LAW. ALL OBEY MOLOCK...

WHEN HIS LITTLE BAND SPOTTED THE HUGE CAVE BEAR IN THE VALLEY, IT WAS MOLOCK WHO GAVE THE COMMAND TO ATTACK... MOLOCK WHO INSTRUCTED THE FIRST SPEAR THRUSTS... MOLOCK WHO SAT AUTHORITATIVELY ON A NEARBY HILLTOP WITH THE WOMEN AND--AWAY FROM ALL DANGER--WATCHED...

DOMAIN

IT WAS NOT THE FIRST CAVE BEAR MOLOCK'S BAND HAD KILLED, BUT IT WAS THE BIGGEST...AND THE QUICKEST. FAR QUICKER THAN SLUGGISH DHONA...

AGGGHHHH!

MOLOCK WAS NOT SADDENED. DHONA HAD BEEN OBSTINATE LATELY. HE BROKE THE RULES; HE TALKED OF THE BIG TRIBE AND HE USED THE FORBIDDEN WORDS...

THOSE WHO DISOBEYED MOLOCK DESERVED TO DIE! HE WATCHED WITH SATISFACTION AS THE OTHERS BROUGHT DOWN THE BEAR...

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER KILLING, ANOTHER NIGHT OF FULL BELLIES!

LIFE WAS GOOD! DHONA WOULD NOT BE MISSED...

CHLOA NUZZLED CLOSE AS JAX AND BHEN SLICED UP THE CARCASS. MOLOCK GRINNED DOWN AT HER. CHLOA WAS BHEN'S MATE BY CEREMONY...BUT MOLOCK WAS LEADER...

FHENA TURNED AWAY SPITEFULLY. SHE GROUND HER TEETH AND MUTTERED SOMETHING UNDER HER BREATH. FHENA WAS MOLOCK'S MATE...BY CEREMONY...

FROM DOWN IN THE VALLEY, BHEN WATCHED MOLOCK COUPLE WITH HIS MATE AND THE VEINS STOOD OUT HOTLY IN HIS NECK...YET HE MOVED NOT AN INCH... MOLOCK WAS LEADER...

THAT NIGHT, MOLOCK LET BHEN HAVE THE FIRST PIECE OF MEAT. BHEN WAS A GOOD HUNTER AND MOLOCK DID NOT WANT TO ANGER HIM OVERMUCH...

AFTERWARD, MOLOCK SLEPT WITH JAX MATE...

MOLOCK AWOKE EARLY, STRETCHED, AND WATCHED THE STARS FADE FROM THE MORNING SKY. IT HAD BEEN SIX MONTHS SINCE THEY HAD LEFT THE BIG TRIBE...

IT HAD BEEN A DARING MOVE FOR MOLOCK. THE TRIBE HAD CALLED HIM BY ANOTHER NAME THEN, BUT ONCE FREE OF THEM AND THEIR STUPID LAWS, HE HAD NAMED HIMSELF MOLOCK THE MIGHTY!

AT FIRST THE OTHERS HAD BEEN EXCITED ABOUT LEAVING THE TRIBE, GOING OFF TO THIS UNEXPLORED VALLEY WITH MOLOCK. BUT SOON THEY HAD GROWN FEARFUL, THEN COWARDLY, BEGGING HIM TO RETURN THEM. MOLOCK HAD HAD TO USE DISCIPLINE...

THEY LEARNED WHO WAS LEADER SOON ENOUGH. THEY LEARNED TO OBEY THE RULES AND NOT TO USE THE FORBIDDEN WORDS...

TODAY THEY WOULD PICK BERRIES NEAR THE FORBIDDEN ZONE, AND THAT MADE MOLOCK NERVOUS. STILL, THE BERRIES WERE THE BIGGEST AND THE SWEETEST HERE.

MOLOCK HAD BEEN TOYING CASUALLY WITH BHEN'S MATE WHEN HE NOTICED THAT JAX WAS NO LONGER WITH THE GROUP...

IT TOOK ONLY MINUTES TO FIND HIM; AS MOLOCK HAD SUSPECTED, JAX HAD WANDERED INTO THE FORBIDDEN ZONE...

JAX! GOWAH!

JAX HAD BROKEN ONE OF THE RULES...JAX MUST BE PUNISHED...

GOWAH KHENA HAGUE, JAX!

KENA? KENA WAHGU?

RULES MUST BE OBEYED... WITHOUT RULES THERE IS NO LEADERSHIP... MOLOCK WAS LEADER... MOLOCK WAS LAW...

JAX AND THE OTHERS HAD BEEN TOLD MANY TIMES NOT TO GO NEAR THE FORBIDDEN ZONE... THE FORBIDDEN ZONE WAS EVIL, IT WOULD ONLY BRING HARM TO THE BAND...MOLOCK WAS LAW... MOLOCK WAS WISE...

HE STANDS THERE A MOMENT, BREATHING HEAVILY. HE THINKS OF THE TRIBE THEN...OF THEIR STUPID RULES AND THEIR STUPID LAWS AND WHAT *THEY* WOULD HAVE DONE WITH JAX...

AND THEY SEEMED TO BE SHOUTING AT HIM, PUSHING AT HIM, *ORDERING* HIM ABOUT, CONSTRICTING HIM, *CRUSHING* HIM UNTIL HE CANNOT BREATH, CANNOT *THINK!*

A SUDDEN PIERCING SCREAM FROM THE BERRY PATCH BREAKS HIS REVERIE. MOLOCK LEAPS OVER JAX'S BRUISED AND BROKEN FORM AND RUNS TO HIS BAND...

EEEEEEEE!!

AS HE BURSTS FROM THE THICKET, HIS HEART FREEZES WITH TERROR...

HERE IS A CREATURE EVEN MIGHTY MOLOCK DARE NOT MEET. HE TURNS WITH THE OTHERS AND THEY SCATTER TO THE HILLS...

YAGGHHH!

LIFE IS GOOD HERE... LIFE IS FREE...

...BUT LIFE IS ALSO SOMETIMES HARD...

IT IS JUST AS WELL... JAX WILL NOT NEED A MATE IN HIS CONDITION NOW ANYWAY...

SUDDENLY LITTLE NHUMA BREAKS DOWN... SHE CRIES AND WAILS AND BEGS MOLOCK TO TAKE THEM BACK TO THE TRIBE...

COLO SHABA! COLO MEGA, PEZA!!

AGH!

IN HER EXCITEMENT SHE FORGETS THE RULES AND USES ONE OF THE FORBIDDEN WORDS...MOLOCK JOGS HER MEMORY...

CHLOA SNUGGLES CLOSER TO HIM, LICKING HIS EAR. STORM CLOUDS ARE GATHERING OVERHEAD. TIME TO GET THE BAND BACK TO THE CAVE...

...SOB-SOB...

LATER THAT NIGHT, CHLOA MAKES MOLOCK SOME BERRY WINE. HE DRINKS MUCH, SLEEPS DEEPLY... BUT AWAKENS BEFORE DAWN...SOMEONE IS MOVING FROM THE CAVE...

HE FOLLOWS THE FOOTPRINTS CLEARLY DEFINED IN THE MORNING DEW...THEY LEAD TO THE FORBIDDEN ZONE...

IT IS CHLOA'S VOICE HE HEARS WITHIN...AND SHE IS USING THE FORBIDDEN WORDS...

--VANGUARD 5 TO EARTH, DO YOU COPY?

--THAT'S RIGHT, WE'VE BEEN MAROONED HERE FOR MONTHS! IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A VACATION! MILLER'S GONE BERSERK! THINKS HE'S A CAVEMAN OR SOMETHING! HE'S GOT US ALL DRESSED UP LIKE SAVAGES!

YOU'VE GOT TO COME GET US! OUR COORDINATES ARE--

EEEEE!!

SMAASH!!

PLEASE, JAKE, PLEASE! DON'T HIT ME! I'M SORRY! I WON'T DO IT AGAIN! I PROMISE! PLEASE!

I'LL COOK JUST FOR YOU! I-I'LL MAKE LOVE TO YOU *EVERY* NIGHT-- ALL YOU WANT! YOU KNOW HOW I CAN MAKE YOU HAPPY! JAKE, IT'S ME, CAROL, JIM'S WIFE! PLEASE LISTEN!

PLEASE, NO!! --AGH!

THUD!

IT IS GOOD HERE. THE AIR IS SWEET. HE IS FREE FROM THE TRIBE AND THEIR STUPID RULES. LIFE IS SIMPLE... CLEAN...

MOLOCK IS LEADER. MOLOCK IS LAW. ALL OBEY MOLOCK...

HEAD OF THE CLASS

JEREMY HAD ARRIVED AT FERGUSON SCHOOL JUST THAT AFTERNOON. UNLIKE THE OTHER BOYS THERE, HE HAD NEVER BEEN TO AN ORPHANAGE IN OHIO BEFORE, THOUGH, FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING, THAT WAS ABOUT THE ONLY PLACE IN THE SOLAR SYSTEM HE HADN'T BEEN SHUNTED TO AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER...

BUT JEREMY DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO REMINISCE ABOUT GROWING UP IN CHILDHOOD ORPHANAGES, IT WAS DINNER TIME AND MISS FERGUSON WAS ABOUT TO SAY GRACE...

...AND WHEN MISS FERGUSON SPOKE... YOU REMAINED SILENT...

...LORD BLESS THIS FOOD TO OUR BODIES AND OUR BODIES TO HIS KEEPING. AMEN.

YOU MAY EAT, CHILDREN.

MISS FERGUSON CHEWED HER FOOD PRIMLY, EFFICIENTLY. SHE DIDN'T LOOK UP AT THE BOY SHE ADDRESSED...

SO, DANIEL... HOW IS THE ALGEBRA COMING ALONG? HM?

...ER, JUST F- FINE, MISS FERGUSON...

SO? DO TELL. LUTHOR INFORMS ME THAT YOU HAVEN'T BEEN STUDYING ENOUGH. ALSO THAT YOU READ COMIC BOOKS IN BED AFTER LIGHTS-OUT WITH A FLASH-LIGHT. HM?

I... I...

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STORY: BRUCE JONES ART: NESTOR REDONDO
Colors: Steve Oliff Letters: Redondo Studios

NAUGHTY, NAUGHTY CHILD. SEEMS TO ME THAT QUALIFIES AS PUNISHABLE ACTIVITY, WOULDN'T YOU SAY, DANIEL?

I... I...

A FIRST-DEGREE DEMERIT I SHOULD THINK. LUTHOR-- THE INDEX FINGER PLEASE...

THIS PUNISHMENT IS JUST, YES, DANIEL?

Y- YES, M-MISS FERGUSON...

YES. AND WHY IS IT JUST?

BECAUSE YOUR HEART IS IN THE RIGHT PLACE-- YOWWWWW!

SOB... SOB...

VERY GOOD. PLACE THE FINGER ON THE MANTLE, PLEASE, LUTHOR. YOU MAY RESUME YOUR DINNER, DANIEL.

AFTER AN EXCRUCIA-TINGLY SILENT DINNER, JEREMY JOINS THE OTHER BOYS IN PREPARING FOR BED...

MY NAME'S JEREMY. I'M NEW HERE...

NO TALKING IN THE HALLS.

IS SHE ALWAYS THAT TOUGH?

WORSE SOMETIME. YOU'LL SEE.

SH! YOU WANNA GET US ALL IN TROUBLE?

WORSE? ...W- WHAT COULD BE WORSE?...

STEP-TWO, STEP-TWO, STEP-TWO-THREE...

JUST A MOMENT...

WERE YOU SLEEPING, ARTHUR?

N-NO, MISS FERGUSON! I...I...IT'S JUST THAT, WELL, I DIDN'T GET MUCH REST LAST NIGHT... AFTER...

NAUGHTY, NAUGHTY CHILD. THE BODY IS GOD'S TEMPLE. TO SLEEP THROUGH EXERCISE IS TO PROFANE THAT TEMPLE. LUTHOR!

PLEASE, I--!!

THIS PUNISHMENT IS JUST, YES, ARTHUR?

Y-YES, MISS FERGUSON...

YES. AND WHY IS IT JUST?

BECAUSE YOUR HEART IS IN THE RIGHT PLACE-- YAGGGHHH!

VERY WELL. PLACE THE ARM ON THE MANTLE PLEASE, LUTHOR. CLASS, YOU MAY RESUME YOUR EXERCISE...

BUT NO ORPHANAGE BOARD IN THE UNIVERSE WOULD STAND FOR THIS, RALPH! UNDER THE ASIMOV LAW, WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE TREATED JUST LIKE OTHER CHILDREN!

YOU'RE NEW HERE, JEREMY, YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND! WE'RE CUT OFF FROM THE REST OF THE UNIVERSE!

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THERE'S ONLY TWO OF THEM, RALPH, AND TWENTY OF US! WE COULD--POISON THEM OR SOMETHING! TAKE OVER THE PLACE!

WON'T WORK. WE NEED MISS FERGUSON. YOU'RE REALLY NAIVE, JEREMY.

YEAH, WHERE YOU FROM ANYWAY, JEREMY?

I'M NOT SURE, REALLY. I'VE BEEN IN PLACES LIKE THIS SINCE I CAN REMEMBER. I'M NOT EVEN SURE 'JEREMY' IS MY REAL NAME. THEY NEVER HAVE BEEN ABLE TO FIND MY RECORDS...

WELL, THERE'S NO ESCAPE FROM FERGUSON SCHOOL, 'JEREMY: YOU MAY AS WELL FACE THAT RIGHT NOW.

HEY, KNOCK IT OFF! I THINK I HEAR HER COMING!

NEXT DAY...

MY JOINTS FEEL CREAKY TODAY, PAUL. YOU WILL RUB SOME OIL ON MY FEET, PLEASE...

YES, MISS FERGUSON.

LUTHOR TELLS ME HE HEARD WHISPERING LAST NIGHT. DO ANY OF YOU KNOW ABOUT THIS? RALPH?

N-NO, MISS FERGUSON! I SWEAR!

I DON'T APPROVE OF SWEARING, RALPH. LUTHOR HEARD YOUR VOICE, CLEARLY AND DISTINCTLY. DO YOU WISH TO DIFFER? ANSWER FREELY.

I... I... N-NO, MISS FERGUSON...

NAUGHTY, NAUGHTY CHILD. A THIRD-DEGREE DEMERIT I SHOULD THINK, LUTHOR!

THIS PUNISHMENT IS JUST, YES, RALPH?

Y-YES, MISS FERGUSON...

YES, AND WHY IS IT JUST?

BECAUSE YOUR HEART IS IN THE RIGHT PLACE-- YAGGHHHH!

BZZZ CLICK POP CK

VERY WELL, PLACE RALPH'S HEAD ON THE MANTLE, LUTHOR, AND GIVE DANIEL BACK HIS FINGER. I THINK HE'S LEARNED HIS LESSON.

PAUL, YOU AND JEREMY MAY CARRY RALPH'S BODY UP THE STAIRS.

YES, MISS FERGUSON!

BUT WHY? WHY DO WE NEED HER?

HER FINGER. MISS FERGUSON'S INDEX FINGER IS THE KEY THAT OPERATES THE HOUSE: THE LIGHTS, THE LOCKS, THE FOOD FOR OUR BIO-CELLS, EVERYTHING. IF SHE'S DEAD, THE HOUSE IS DEAD.

BUT SHE'S ONLY A ROBOT LIKE US! IF WE DISCONNECT HER BRAIN UNIT, IT'LL STOP HER JUST LIKE IT STOPPED RALPH HERE. BUT WE CAN STILL USE HER FINGER TO RUN THE PLACE.

NOPE, WON'T WORK.

THE FINGER KEY CELL IS CONNECTED DIRECTLY TO THE BRAIN CELL IN HER HEAD. I'VE STUDIED THESE THINGS. SHE'S GOT US, JEREMY! SHE'S FOOLPROOF!

THERE MUST BE A WAY... THERE MUST!

ONE WEEK LATER...

HI, RALPH! GOOD TO HAVE YOU BACK WITH US!

WHAT'S UP? WHY THE SECRET MEETING?

JEREMY'S GOT A PLAN!

PAUL HERE KNOWS ALL ABOUT ROBOT ANATOMY. HE STOLE A BOOK FROM MISS FERGUSON'S PRIVATE LIBRARY! ALL WE GOTTA DO IS TEAR OFF MISS FERGUSON'S HEAD! THEN TEAR OFF ONE OF *OUR* HEADS AND PUT IT ON HER BODY! THE OLD LADY'S BODY WILL STILL WORK, BUT NOT HER BRAIN.

WHAT ABOUT LUTHOR?

I ALREADY TOOK CARE OF LUTHOR-- BATTERY ACID IN HIS NASAL CIRCUITS!

OKAY, OKAY, BUT WHO VOLUNTEERS TO HAVE HIS HEAD REMOVED-- THAT *HURTS!*

ME.

C'MON, LET'S GET STARTED! IT'S ALMOST DINNER TIME!

...EASY... *EASY!*... OH, GOD, THAT HURTS!...

NGH!... C'MON, FELLAS, *PULL!*

AGGHH!

H-HE (GASP!) HE WAS *REAL!* H-HE WAS *HUMAN!* I THOUGHT THERE WAS A *SHORTAGE* OF HUMAN CHILDREN-- ISN'T THAT WHY WE WERE BUILT IN THE FIRST PLACE?

W-WHAT (CHOKE!) DO WE DO NOW?

WELL, WE KNOW I AIN'T NO HUMAN! TOBY, YOU AND KEITH GO DOWN AND START TO WORK ON THE OLD LADY! PAUL, YOU AND BRIAN GET TO WORK ON ME!

MISS FERGUSON-N-N-N-N-N...

EH? WHO'S THAT? WHAT ARE YOU DOING DOWN HERE? LUTHOR?

AGH! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? ANIMALS! BEASTS! LET ME GO!

NO! NO! AGHH! ZAP! BZT! CRACKLE!

HURRY! GET IT ON! GET RALPH'S HEAD ON HER BODY!

IN MOMENTS...

IT'S ON! IT'S WORKING!

NAUGHTY, NAUGHTY CHILDREN... SHOULD HAVE READ A MORE CURRENT BOOK, PAUL...

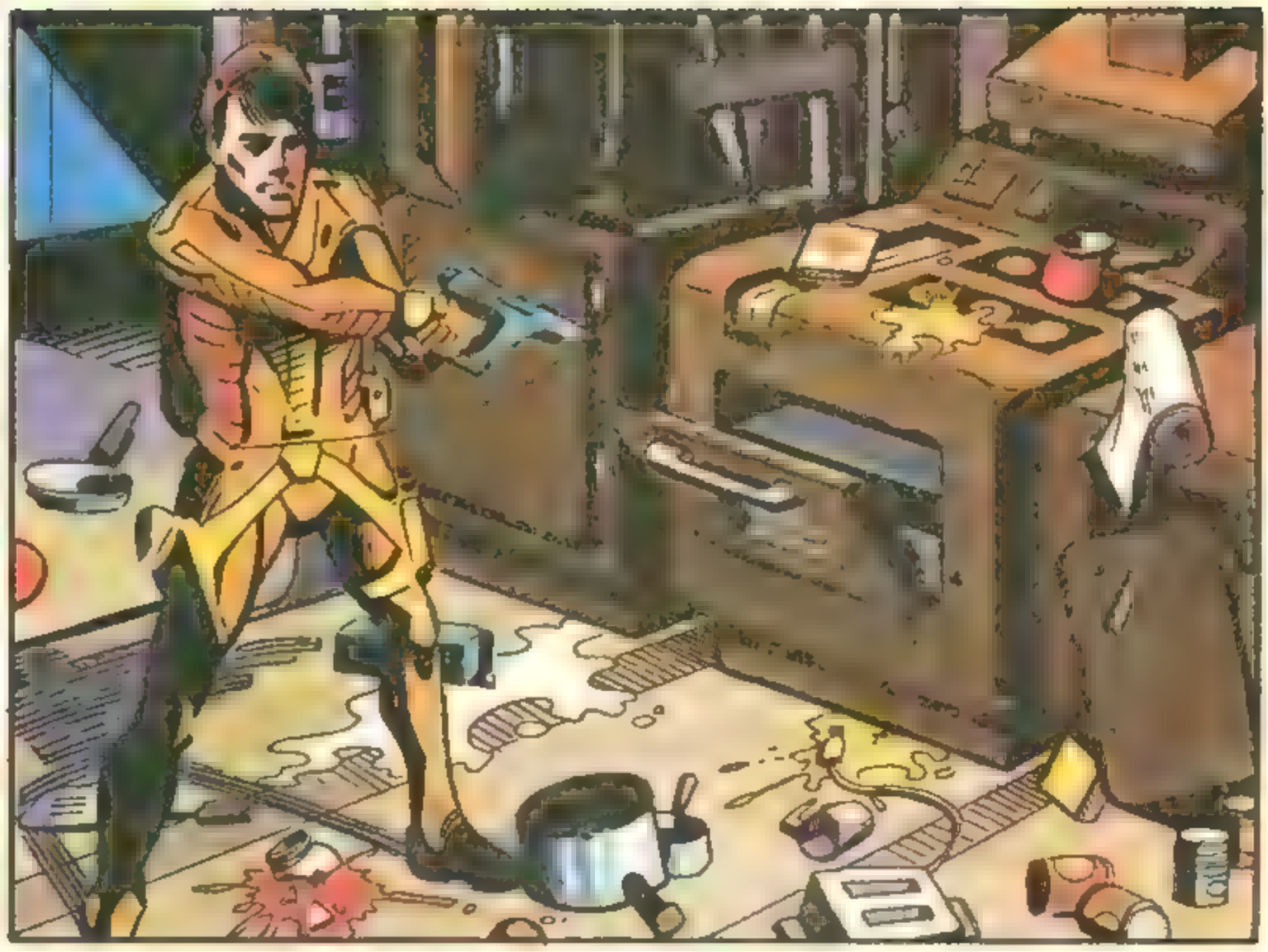
OH MY GOD! IT'S STILL HER!

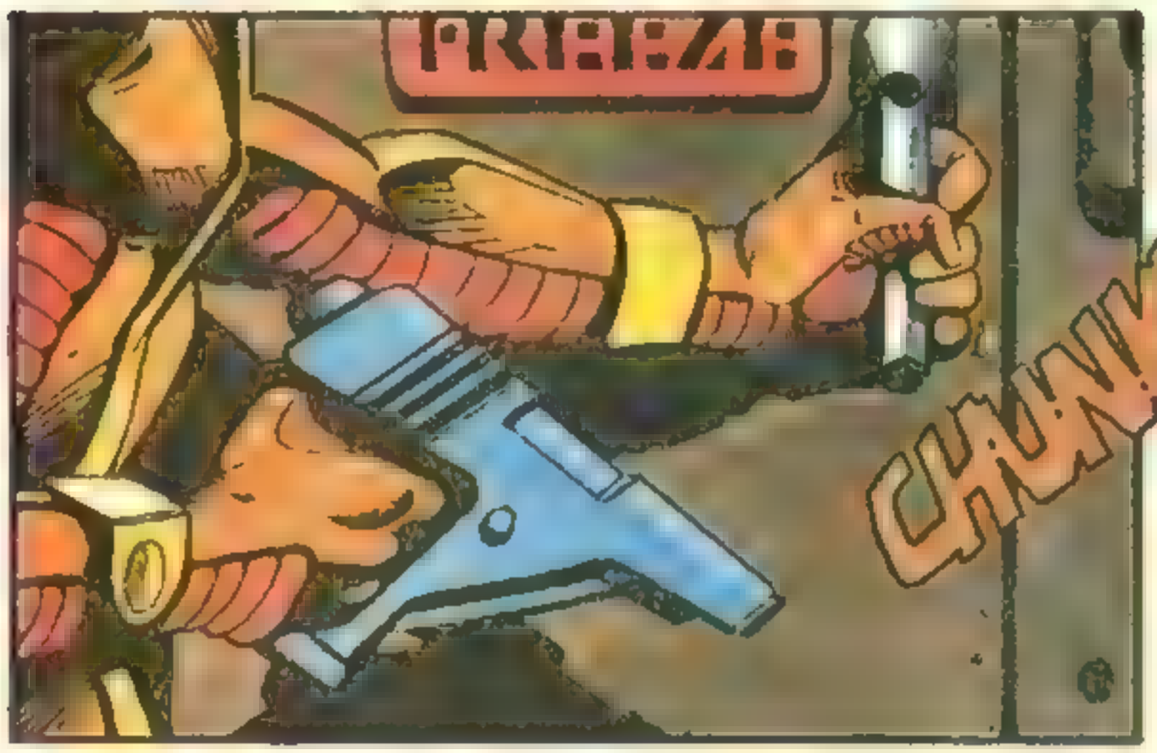
GIVING YOU ROBOT-CHILDREN HUMAN EMOTIONS CERTAINLY DIDN'T MAKE YOU ANY SMARTER. I ALWAYS TOLD YOU MY HEART WAS IN THE RIGHT PLACE -- NAMELY, MY HEAD!

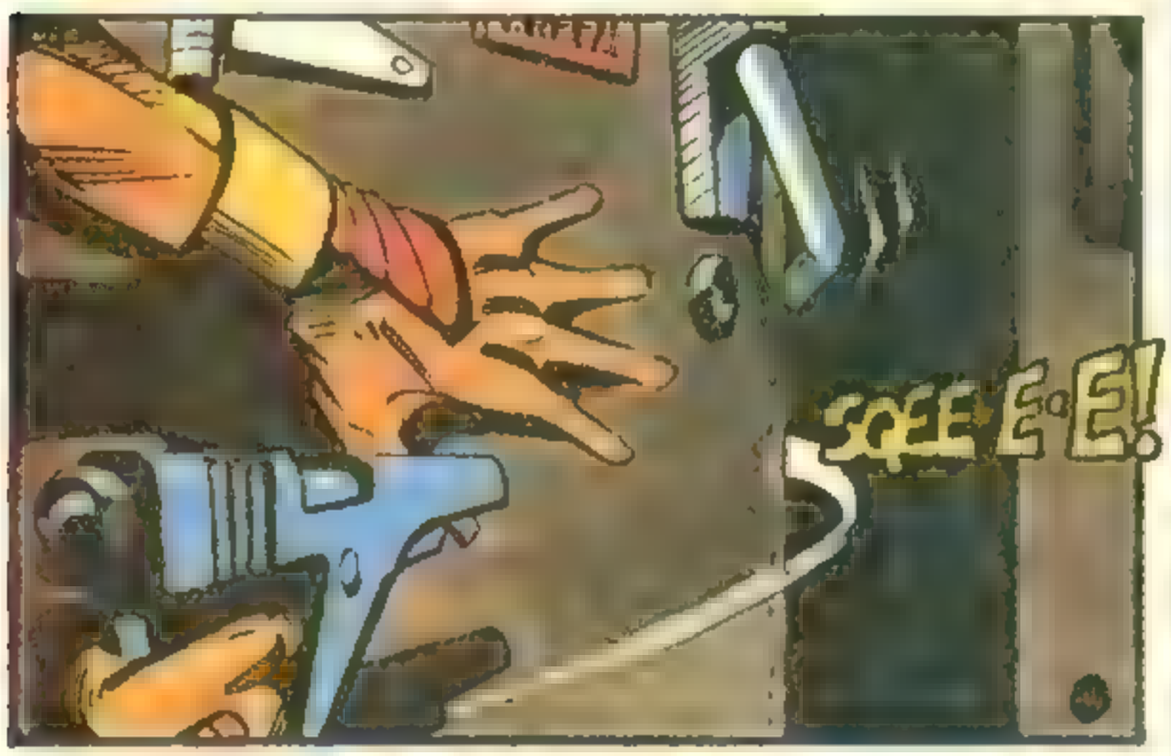
...ALL THE NEW ADULT MODELS HAVE THEIR BRAINS IN THEIR CHESTS! MORE PROTECTION, YOU SEE!

NOW... WHO'S FIRST FOR PUNISHMENT?

Vicious
CIRCLE
TFS 661




FREEZE!
CHUNK!

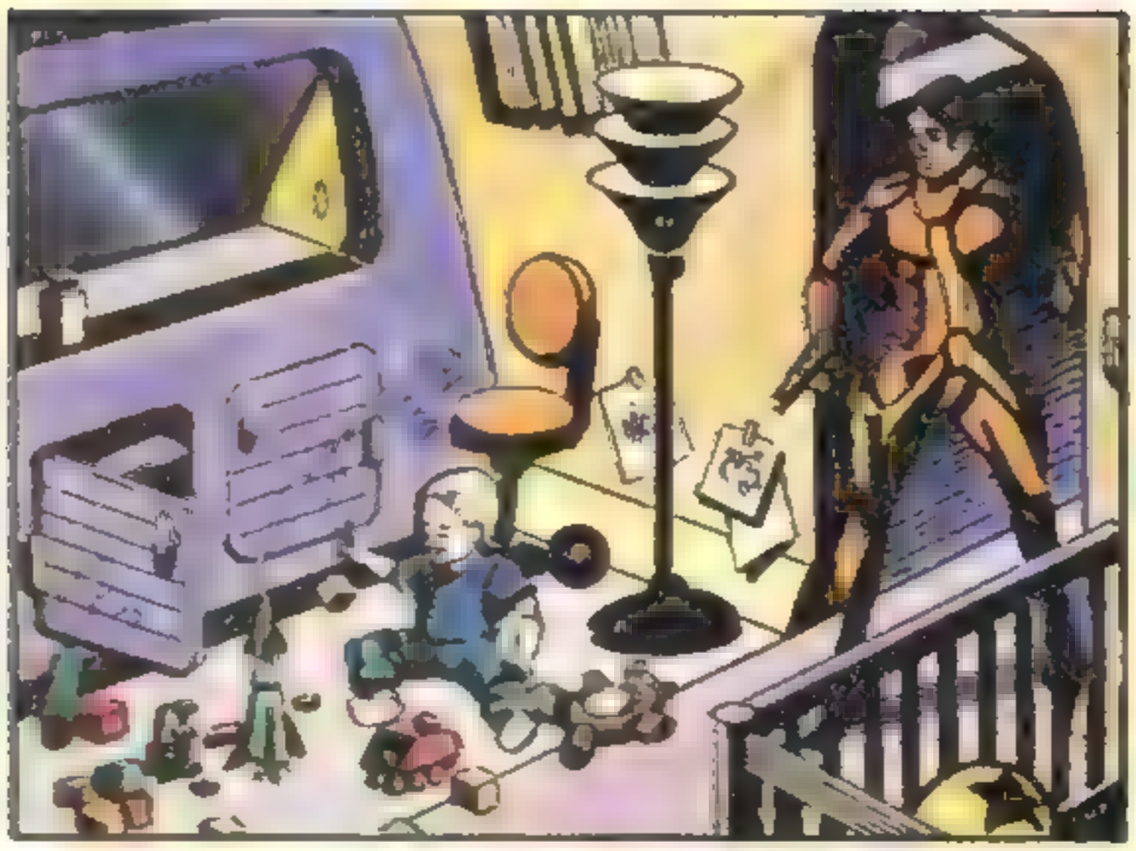

SQEE-E-E!

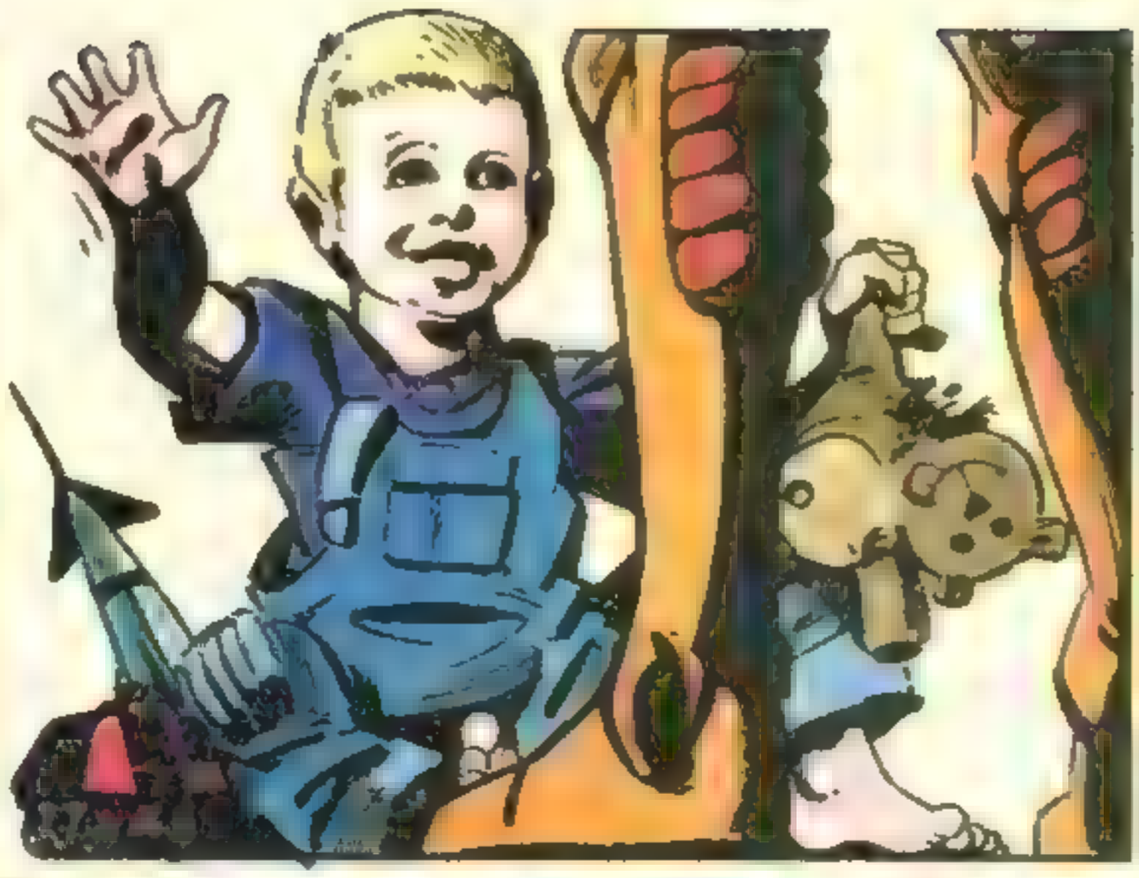
TIKKA TIKKA TIK TIKA TIK TIKA!

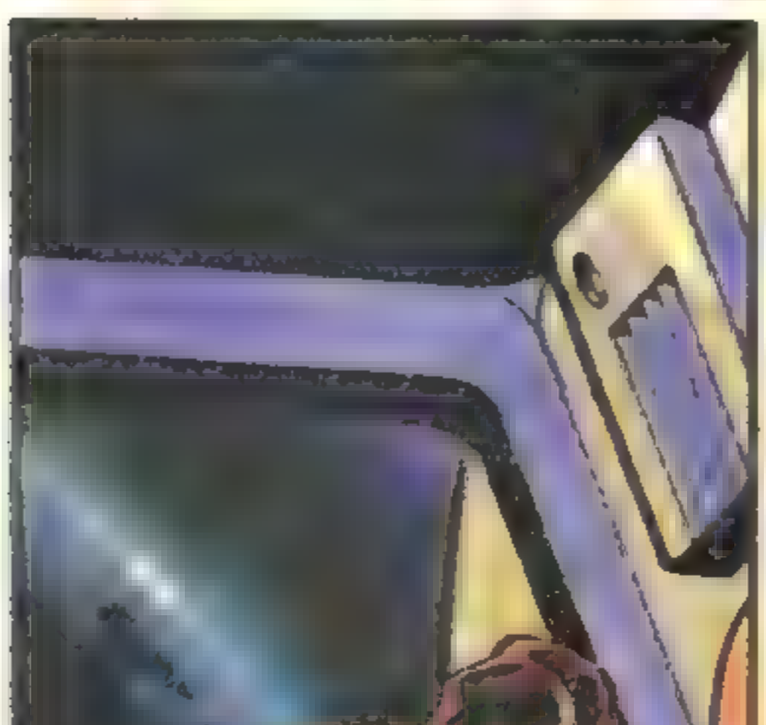
ANCIENT MYTH & LEGEND

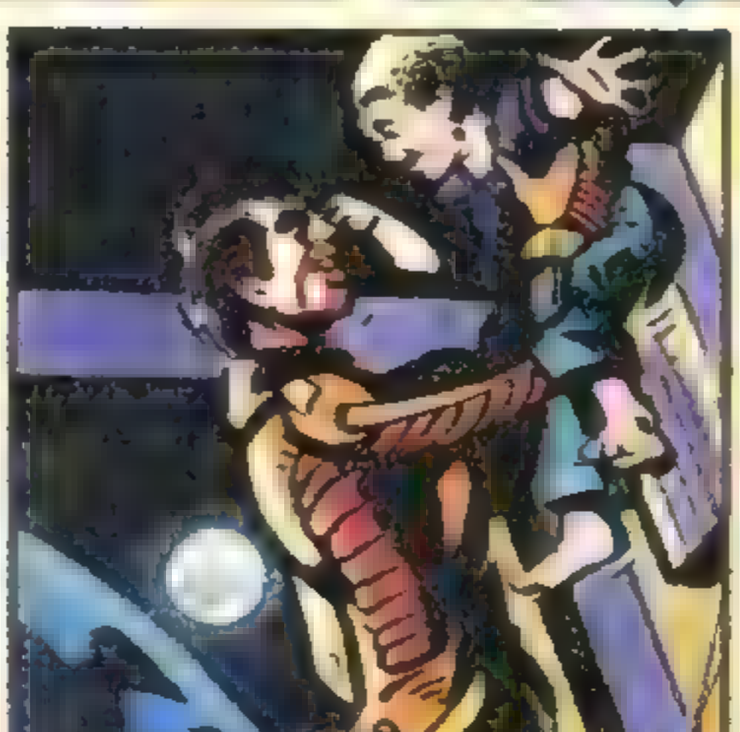
by APRIL CAMPBELL

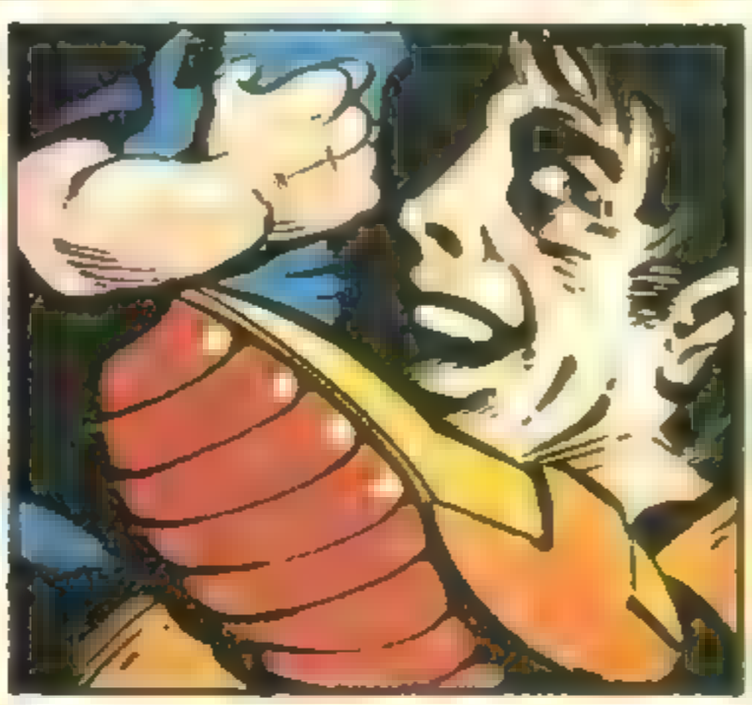
BOINK!











BUMP!

ZAT! ZAT! ZAT!

SHRAK!

SWAP!

SKRAK!

TIKKA-TIK! TIKKA!

PAM!

WE WERE ALIENS; CREATURES FROM ANOTHER WORLD COME TO THE SALVATION, NOT OF HUMANKIND, BUT OF THE PLANET ITSELF. MAN HAD WROUGHT MUCH DESTRUCTION HERE, MUCH NEAR-IRREVERSIBLE CHAOS. THE PLANET EARTH NEEDED AN INTELLIGENT FORCE TO RIGHT THOSE TERRIBLE WRONGS, TO MAKE PARCHED, BURNT HILLS GREEN AGAIN FOR LESS INTELLIGENT, BUT NO LESS DESERVING, CREATURES. THE OWL, THE BEAR, THE ELK, THE RODENT, COULD NOT DO THESE THINGS FOR THEMSELVES. IT WAS THE JOB OF A SPECIES NOT OF THIS LAND, AND WE ACCEPTED THE TASK WILLINGLY...

FOR WE HAD WATCHED FROM AFAR... AND WE HAD GROWN TO LOVE THE GREEN HILLS... PERHAPS EVEN MORE THAN MAN HAD...

BESIDES...ARE NOT ALL THINKING CREATURES BROTHERS?

THE INHERITORS

WE STARED UPWARD AT THE MYRIAD PINPOINT LAMPS WINKING SOFTLY BACK AT US. THE FORCE THAT HAD BROUGHT US TO THIS STRANGE LAND WE HAD BURIED FOREVER IN THE DARK SEA, THAT NO TRACE OF IT MIGHT EVER BE FOUND AGAIN...

STORY: BRUCE JONES ART: SCOTT HAMPTON
Letters: Carrie McCarthy

FOR WE WERE THE INHERITORS, THE SUCCESSORS TO MAN. AND IT WAS OUR DECISION TO LOOK AND ACT AS MUCH LIKE HIM AS POSSIBLE...

TO THAT END, WE SOUGHT TO RELINQUISH ANY TIES TO OUR HOMELAND; ANY MEMORIES OF WHENCE WE HAD COME, WHO WE WERE -- WHAT WE LOOKED LIKE! ONLY THE BUBBLE REMAINED WITH US...

WE LIVED IN THE BUBBLE, SLEPT IN THE BUBBLE, UNDERWENT OUR ***OPERATIONS*** IN THE BUBBLE... OPERATIONS THAT MADE US LOOK MORE AND MORE ***HUMAN*** AS THE WEEKS WENT BY. WE ***STUDIED*** IN THE BUBBLE... LEARNED THE WAYS OF MAN...

WE HAD ATTEMPTED TO CONTACT MAN BEFORE --TO WARN HIM OF THE COMING HOLOCAUST SHOULD HE CONTINUE HIS PRESENT PATH. BUT ALTHOUGH HE HEARD US, HE DID NOT UNDERSTAND US, FOR OUR LANGUAGES WERE WORLDS APART. MAN SPOKE WITH HIS ***LIPS***...

YET MAN HAD DEVELOPED WELL ON HIS PLANET, COME FAR BEFORE THE GREAT FIRESTORMS TO BE AS SUCCESSFUL AS MAN, WE HAD TO BECOME ***LIKE*** MAN. WE NEEDED FIVE FINGERS... STRONG LEGS. EXTERNAL GENITALIA... AND A NEW WAY OF ***BREATHING***...

THE PHYSICIANS WHO CAME WITH US SPENT MANY HOURS AT THE SURGICAL TABLES. IT WAS SOMETIMES PAINFUL AND ALWAYS DIFFICULT FOR THERE WERE ALMOST NO LIVING MEN TO SERVE AS MODELS...

...ALMOST...

ONCE IN A GREAT WHILE, ONE WOULD STUMBLE INTO OUR CAMP... IT WAS ALWAYS A TIME OF GREAT SADNESS... AND DANGER...

YAGGHHH!

WE UNDERSTOOD NOT MAN'S PROPENSITY FOR DESTRUCTION... NOR THE MEANS TO RETALIATE AGAINST IT. LIFE WAS SACRED TO US...EVEN MAN'S...

USUALLY, ONCE THE WRETCHED CREATURE'S WRATH WAS SPENT...

...IT EITHER SHAMBLED OFF AGAIN, OR DIED QUIETLY, ITS SYSTEM SUCCUMBING AT LAST TO THE NUCLEAR POISONS SWIMMING WITHIN IT...

OUR ONE CONSOLATION WAS THE DETAILED ANATOMICAL MODEL ITS BODY WOULD SUPPLY TO OUR PHYSICIANS...EACH DAY WE LEARNED MORE ABOUT THE CREATURES WE WERE BECOMING...

EACH NIGHT WE WOULD GATHER BEFORE A GREAT BONFIRE AND THE YOUNG OF US WOULD QUESTION THE ELDERS...

WHY CANNOT WE SING THE SOUL SONG, OH TEACHER?

IT IS NO LONGER PERMITTED, BETH. IT IS A REMINDER OF WHAT WE WERE...

WE ARE THE DOMINANT SPECIES OF THE PLANET EARTH NOW. WE MUST LEARN TO WALK ON MAN'S LAND... BREATHE HIS WAY... SING HIS SONGS... WE CANNOT GO BACK... *EVER*...

THE DAYS PASSED. BETH AND I ROAMED THE COASTLINE TOGETHER, TRYING OUT OUR STRANGE NEW LEGS...

OH ARD, I AM FRIGHTENED...

NO, BETH. YOU'RE DOING WELL...YOU WALK ALMOST HUMAN NOW.

THE ***GENITAL*** RECONSTRUCTION? BUT IT IS NOTHING! I CAME THROUGH IT FINE!

NOT OF THAT... I...I UNDERGO THE SEX OPERATION NEXT WEEK... *(CHOKE!)*

IT IS DIFFERENT FOR FEMALES. THE OPERATION IS MORE DIFFICULT. IF...IF I DO NOT...IF THEY CANNOT ...OH, ***ARD!*** THEY MIGHT MATE YOU WITH SOMEONE ***ELSE!***

THEY WILL MATE ME WITH ***YOU,*** SWEET BETH. WE WILL SPEND OUR LIFETIMES TOGETHER! I PROMISE YOU!

OH ARD, I WANT ***SO MUCH*** TO BE HUMAN! PUT YOUR MOUTH ON MINE, ARD! KISS ME LIKE THE HUMANS USED TO KISS! PLEASE!

ONE NIGHT TEACHER HAD A SURPRISE FOR US...

I KNOW HOW MUCH YOU ALL MISS SINGING THE SOUL SONG--THE SONG OF BROTHERHOOD. I HAVE INSTRUCTED JAN HERE TO WRITE NEW WORDS FOR US--WORDS APPROPRIATE TO OUR NEW BODIES...

OH LET US RETURN TO THE GREEN ROLLING HILLS, OH LET US RUN TO EMBRACE THEM; OH LET US GO FORTH THROUGH THE DEEP YELLOW GRASS, FIND THE WIND AND THE SUN AND CHASE THEM...

OH LET US STAY CLOSE IN THIS WORLD OF OUR BIRTH, OH LET OUR SIX BILLION BE ONE; THROUGH THIS SONG THAT WE SING, IN THE CLEAR COUNTRY AIR, OVER ENDLESS GREEN HILLS THAT WE LOVE...

THE NEW SONG WAS MET WITH GENERAL ENTHUSIASM, BUT AS THE MEETING DISPERSED...

BETH ...YOU'RE TROUBLED..

WE LOOKED OUT TO SEA, TO THE BILLIONS OF TWINKLING WORLDS FAR AWAY...SO VERY FAR AWAY...

I DON'T LIKE THE NEW WORDS, ARD... I MISS THE OLD ONES...I MISS OUR BEAUTIFUL HOME. IT IS HOT AND DRY HERE...

MAN DID NOTHING FOR US... WHY SHOULD WE CLEAN UP AFTER HIS MISTAKES?...

ALL WORLDS ARE LINKED, BETH. IF THERE HAD ONLY BEEN TIME, MAN WOULD HAVE SEEN THIS.

TOMORROW I UNDERGO MY SEX OPERATION...

...I HOPE THERE WILL BE TIME FOR *US*, ARD...

I WAS OUT GATHERING FRUIT WITH THE OTHERS THE NEXT DAY WHEN ANOTHER OF THE CRAZED HUMANS ATTACKED...

AGGH!

COMMIE BASTARDS! DROP MISSILES ON US, WILL YA!

NO!

ARD!

BUT--

WE ARE CREATURES OF PEACE, ARD...DO NOT INTERFERE...

COMMIE SCUM! THAT'LL LEARN YA! GOTTA KEEP THE NATION PURE!

ARD! ARD! COME QUICKLY!

IT'S BETH! SHE --SHE D'ON'T PASS THE OPERATION! SHE'S LEFT HER SICKBAY BED! AND SHE WAS BLEEDING BADLY!

JAN, WHA--?

I CURSED MY NEW EARTH LEGS...CURSED THE ROUGH SOIL UNDER MY FEET...

BETH! BETH!

THE AIR BURNED MY THROAT--A THROAT NOT ACCUSTOMED TO BREATHING THIS WAY...

BETH!

...BETH...

SHE HAD RIPPED FRENZIEDLY AT HER ALIEN CLOTHING...A CLOTHING SHE HAD ALWAYS HATED. ONLY THE COLLAR REMAINED TIGHT ABOUT HER THROAT...

I BEGGED THE OTHERS TO SEND HER BACK HOME FOR A DECENT BURIAL... BUT THAT WAS IMPOSSIBLE, THEY SAID...EARTH WAS HER HOME NOW...

NEXT MORNING, TEACHER CALLED TO ME...

THIS IS KATH, ARD. SHE WILL BE YOUR MATE. THE TIME HAS COME FOR YOUR COUPLING. THIS WORLD NEEDS NEW CHILDREN..

I TOOK KATH'S HAND RELUCTANTLY AS WAS MY DUTY...

NOT THAT WAY, ARD...CAN'T WE GO TO THE CLIFFS?

MY THOUGHTS WERE WITH BETH...YET KATH WAS SWEET AND GENTLE. I TRIED TO THINK ONLY OF MY BIOLOGY LESSONS AS SHE EMBRACED ME THERE ON THE CRAG...

AGGH!

NO!

EEEEEE!

(CHOKE!) ...ARD!

NO!

CHOMP!

I HAD DONE A TERRIBLE THING. I HAD GONE AGAINST ALL MY TEACHINGS AT THE BUBBLE...

PERHAPS... PERHAPS WE'RE BECOMING MORE HUMAN THAN WE KNOW, KATH...

ARD, *LOOK!*

THEY HAVE SEEN, KATH, AND THEY KNOW... THEY KNOW THAT WE HAVE FAILED HERE...

I MUST TELL TEACHER ...I MUST TELL THE OTHERS OF THIS AWFUL THING I HAVE DONE. WE MUST GO BACK TO OUR OWN WORLD...

ARD, WAIT!

PERHAPS WE *ARE* BECOMING MORE HUMAN, BUT ISN'T THAT WHAT THE GROUP WANTED? PERHAPS THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES TO LIVE IN THE WORLD OF DRY AIR AND ROUGH SOIL! MAN *WANTED* TO COMMUNICATE WITH US, ARD! HE WAS COMPASSIONATE AS WELL AS VIOLENT!

IT WAS AS MUCH *OUR* FAILURE AS MAN'S THAT NO COMMUNICATION WAS MADE! LET US NOT FAIL HIM *AGAIN*, ARD! LET US MAKE THIS WORLD GREEN AGAIN, FOR *ALL* OF US!

AND LET US REPLACE THE BROKEN, RAVAGED LIFE YOU HAVE TAKEN THIS DAY... WITH A NEW YOUNG LIFE OF OUR OWN MAKING...

OUR COUPLING WAS CLUMSY, UNSURE... BUT OUR NEW BODIES RESPONDED JUST AS TEACHER AND THE OTHERS TOLD US THEY WOULD... I THOUGHT OF BETH, BUT MY THOUGHTS WERE GOOD...

LATER, WE DESCENDED THE HILL TO THE BEACH, WHERE TEACHER WAS CALLING ANOTHER MEETING...

TOMORROW YOU WILL UNDERGO THE FINAL OPERATION, LINKING YOU FOREVER WITH THE HUMAN RACE: THE OPERATION TO SEAL YOUR BREATHING HOLE.

I KNOW HOW MUCH YOU MISS YOUR HOME, YOUR FRIENDS, HOW MUCH YOU'D LIKE TO BE AMONG THEM AGAIN...I HAVE THEREFORE DECIDED TO REMOVE YOUR COLLARS ONE DAY EARLY!

A GASP OF ELATION WENT UP FROM THE GROUP AS THE KEY WAS PASSED AROUND. A GREAT RUSH OF AIR ENTERED MY LUNGS AS THE COLLAR WAS PULLED FREE...

RUN, MY CHILDREN! RUN AND BE FREE ONE LAST TIME!

I DIVED INTO THE SURF WITH KATH, SQUIRTING A GREAT GEYSER OF WATER FROM MY BLOWHOLE. A BILLION VOICES SANG JOYFULLY AS WE LEAPED PLAYFULLY AMONG OUR CHILDHOOD FRIENDS... ***HOME AT LAST!***

O LET US RETURN TO THE GREEN ROLLING WAVES, O LET US SWIM TO EMBRACE THEM; O LET US GO FORTH THROUGH THE DEEP BLUE BRINE, FIND THE WIND AND THE SUN AND CHASE THEM...

O LET US STAY CLOSE IN THIS WORLD OF OUR BIRTH, O LET OUR SIX BILLION BE ONE; THROUGH THIS SONG THAT WE SING IN THE CLEAR OCEAN AIR, OVER ENDLESS GREEN WAVES THAT WE LOVE...

L. SCOTT HAMPTON '83

DARK PASSAGE

MOSTLY WE LOVED THE ROCKETS. THE *ROCKETS!*... AH, THE *ROCKETS!* ALL *SHINY* AND *TALL* AND *SILVERY* AND *GLEAMING* IN THEIR LAUNCH CRADLES.

OH, WE LOVED *OTHER* THINGS, TOO, TAISY AND I...WE LOVED THE SMELL OF NEWLY MOWED MISSISSIPPI *LAWNS* AND THE BITTERSWEET TASTE OF SUMMER'S FIRST DELICIOUS GLASS OF COLD *LEMONADE* AND THE WAY THE CURRENT CHARGED RECKLESSLY AROUND THE BANKS OF THE WILD *YAZOO*...

WE LOVED THE SOUND OF *CHURCH BELLS* ACROSS THE VALLEY ON A CLEAR SUNDAY MORN AND THE COOL, SWEET *GRASS* FLYING BENEATH OUR BARE FEET AS WE RACED WILD AND HOT AND *FREE* AND *JOYOUS* ACROSS *SUTTER'S FIELD* TOWARD THE BIG SPACE PORT...

T. YEATES

BUT MOSTLY WE LOVED THE ROCKETS... AH, THE *ROCKETS!* AND MOSTLY WE LOVED THE BIG *SILVER NEEDLE*...

I SEE HER ROB, I SEE HER SURE NUFF! OH AN'T SHE A *BEAUTY?*

THERE SHE IS TAISY! LOOK AT HER. OH, *GOLLY*...

I'M GONNA FLY THE NEEDLE SOMEDAY, TAISY. I'M GONNA SIT RIGHT THERE IN *FIRST CLASS* WITH ALL THE OTHER RICH FOLK AND DRINK EXPENSIVE WINES AND RUN MY HAND ALONG THE LUSH *RED UPHOLSTERY!*

OH, *ROB!*

WILL YOU TAKE ME WITH YOU, ROB, WILL YOU?

'COURSE I WILL! AIN'T I YER *BEST* PAL? AIN'T WE *BLOOD BROTHERS* FER EVER AND EVER? DIDN'T WE MAKE A PLEDGE OF FAITHFULLNESS UNDER THE BIG SYCAMORE IN *GUTTER'S FIELD?*

SURE, BUT... SOMEDAY... SOMEDAY YOU'LL *GROW UP*, ROB... SOMEDAY YOU'LL WANT A *WIFE*--A-A GIRL OF YER *OWN KIND*...

YER MY KIND! *YER* GONNA BE MY WIFE! IT'S *YOU* I WANT AND NOBODY ELSE!

DON'T *SAY* THAT! *NEVER!*

I-IT (SOB) WON'T WORK, ROB... WHAT ABOUT OUR CHILDREN?

WHAT *ABOUT* THEM? LISTEN, I DON'T CARE *WHAT* OTHER PEOPLE SAY, OR WHAT THEY *THINK!* IT'S YOU AND ME FOREVER, TAISY, YOU HEAR ME? JUST LIKE WE SWORE UNDER THE BIG SYCAMORE! YOU *HEAR* ME, TAISY? *HUH?*

...I... I HEAR YOU, ROB (SNIFF)...

WE'LL GO *AWAY*, TAISY, YOU AND ME... WE'LL GO AWAY ON THE *SILVER NEEDLE!* WE'LL RIDE FIRST CLASS ALL THE WAY! YOU'LL SEE! YOU'LL SEE, TAISY!

TARBOX WAS A LITTLE TOWN...A JERKWATER TOWN...SOME EVEN CALLED IT A BACKWARD TOWN... BUT IT WAS *HOME!* AND WE *LOVED* IT, TAISY AND ME...

TARBOX LIQUORS

MOST FOLK WOULD SAY THERE WASN'T NUTHIN TO *DO* IN TARBOX 'CEPT SIT AROUND THE CRACKER BARREL AT *ED'S GENERAL* AND CHEW THE FAT...

BUT TAISY AND ME WE *NEVER* HAD NO PROBLEMS WHEN WE GOT TIRED OF HEARIN THE LOCAL GOSSIP WE'D GO OUT INTO *MILLER'S SWAMP* AND CHASE *MARSH RATS.*

AND WHEN WE GOT TIRED OF MARSH RATS, WE'D MAKE UP OUR *OWN* CRITTERS...

EEEK!

I'LL SAVE YA, M'AM!

ZAP!

GOT 'IM!

MY HERO!

YER SAFE NOW, PRINCESS LANNA!

YOU MAY TAKE ME TO MY FATHER'S *DOMAIN,* PRINCE PHOEBUS!

TAISY'S FATHER'S *DOMAIN* WAS NUTHIN' MORE THAN A TINROOFED *HOVEL* OUTSIDE OF TOWN...THERE WAS A BARN NEXT TO IT, BUT MR. UKELEY NEVER COULD AFFORD ANY LIVESTOCK...

I LOVED OLD MR. UKELEY ALMOST AS MUCH AS I LOVED HIS DAUGHTER TAISY... AND I LOVED THE *DARK* AND *TERRIFYING* AND *WONDEROUS* TALES HE SPUN THERE IN THE WARMTH AND SECURITY OF HIS LITTLE FRONT ROOM...

...AND THEN THE *DEMON-BATS* FROM ALTAIR IV DESCENDED ON THE HELPLESS LITTLE SHIP...

...AND THE *SIRENS* OF *ROMULUS II* THAT NO MAN COULD *RESIST* AND NO MAN COULD *SURVIVE*...

WE EVEN LOVED *SCHOOL*, TAISY AND ME... EVEN THOUGH THAT'S WHERE MOST OF THE *TROUBLE* STARTED...

HEY *WHITAKER!* WHAT ARE YA DOIN' WALKIN' WITH *HER* KIND? AIN'T YOU EVER HEARD THE *FACTS* OF *LIFE?*

HAR-HAR-HAR!

MEBE WHITAKER HANGS OUT WITH *INFERIORS* CAUSE HE CAN'T PLEASE THE *OTHER* GIRLS!

SHE'S *NOT* INFERIOR, DAMN YOU, SHE'S *NOT!*

ROB *NO!*

GET HIM, B FF! KNOCK HIS *EARS* BACK!

MY *BRAVE* PRINCE PHOEBUS!

NOBODY CALLS MY GIRLFRIEND *INFERIOR!*

SCHOOL WAS SCHOOL...BUT *SATURDAYS* WERE *SATURDAYS!* TIME FOR MARSH RATS AND LEMONADE AND CANDY STORE LICORICE AND *ROCKETS*...AH, THE *ROCKETS!*

THERE SHE IS TAISY! THE *SILVER NEEDLE!* ALL *WASHED* AND *SHINY* AND READY TO LEAP UP AND SHAKE DOWN THE *HEAVENS!*

IT'S *BEAUTIFUL*, ROB!

...YOU'RE GETTING *OLDER*, SON, *GROWING UP!* TIME TO START THINKING OF COLLEGE... OF...GIRLS OF YOUR *OWN KIND.*

BUT I WANT *TAISY.* WE'RE GONNA BE *MARRIED.*

BUT, ROB, DARLING, IT ISN'T--PRACT CAL, DON'T YOU SEE? YOU'LL WANT *CHILDREN* SOMEDAY, YOU'LL WANT--

I'LL WANT *TAISY, TAISY!* I'LL *ALWAYS* WANT HER! WE'RE GOING AWAY TOGETHER ON THE BIG SILVER NEEDLE.

THEN THERE CAME THE AWFUL NIGHT I PASSED BY TAISY'S PLACE AND FOUND OLD MAN UKELEY HEAVING WATER AT HIS SHED.

MR. UKELEY! MR. UKELEY! WHAT *HAPPENED?*

BUNCH OF YOUNG ROUGHNECKS...CAME ACROSS THE TRACKS YELLIN' AND WHOOPIN' ...CARRYING TORCHES...*HOOLIGANS*...

TAISY! WHERE'S *TAISY?*

TAISY WAS IN THE BARN ...WHERE THEY HAD CHASED HER...

TAISY! NO!

OH, GOD! I'LL *KILL* THEM! I'LL *KILL* THEM!

EASY SON... THAT WON'T HELP NONE...

IT TOOK US OVER *TWO* HOURS TO REASSEMBLE HER... LUCKILY NOTHING WAS *SERIOUSLY* DAMAGED...

TAISY...HONEY, CAN YOU HEAR ME?

DON'T BE MAD, ROB... THEY'RE JUST KIDS...

THE *WORST* PART CAME LATER...

I BREAK THE.R NECKS, I'LL--

I...I WANT YOU TO GO *AWAY*, ROB... I (SOB) I WANT YOU *NEVER* TO COME BACK!

TA.SY! ARE YOU *CRAZY*--

T-THEY'LL *HURT* YOU, ROB (SOB) ONE DAY THEY MIGHT HURT YOU *BAD!* THEY'RE JUST KIDS NOW, BUT THEY'LL *GROW UP*, AND THEY'LL HATE YOU AS MUCH AS THEY HATE *ME!*

AND YOU'RE *GROWING UP*, ROB! YOU'RE GETTING *OLDER!* DON'T YOU SEE? YOU'LL GROW, BUT I'LL ALWAYS BE THIRTEEN, *ALWAYS!* OUR KIND WASN'T MEANT TO BE TOGETHER, ROB, NOT PAST *CHILDHOOD!*

THEY'RE CALLING YOU A *FREAK*, ROB! THEY'RE CALLING US *BOTH* FREAKS! I'M *TIRED* OF IT, DO YOU HEAR? I'M *SICK* OF IT! I DON'T WANT TO BE A *FREAK!* I DON'T WANT PEOPLE GETTING HURT! I WANT YOU TO GO, ROB! NOW! *NOW!*

I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT! NOT *TAISY!* I SCREAMED AT HER, SHOUTED NAMES AT HER, SAID *TERRIBLE* THINGS. THEN I RAN... I RAN OFF OLD MAN UKELEY'S PORCH INTO THE NIGHT... I RAN ACROSS SUTTER'S FIELD TO THE BIG ROCKET PORT, TO THE *SILVER NEEDLE...*

HERE, HERE, SONNY! WHERE DO YOU THINK YER GO N'?

I (SOB) I'M GOING TO MARS, OR MAYBE SATURN! I'M GONNA RIDE THE SILVER NEEDLE! (SOB) WHERE IS IT?

THE SILVER NEEDLE? WHY SHE'S IN DRY DOCK, SON, AIN'T YOU HEARD? THEY SCRAPPED THE WHOLE FLEET! YEP, REPLACED HER LAST WEEK WITH ONE OF THE SMALLER ECONO LINES!

NO! (SOB-SOB) NO!!

I LAY IN SUTTER'S FIELD ALL NIGHT CRYING MY EYES OUT. WHEN THE DAWN SUN BROKE THROUGH THE STARS, I WALKED HOME TO MY PARENTS. I NEVER CROSSED THE TRACKS TO TAISYS PLACE AGAIN...

A MONTH LATER WE MOVED TO VENUS..BUT NOT ABOARD THE SILVER NEEDLE. IT WAS GONE FOREVER. I ATTENDED A NEW SCHOOL, MADE NEW BOYFRIENDS..NEW GIRLFRIENDS ...STARTED COLLEGE...

MEDICINE FOUND ME. I WORKED HARD, GRADUATED WITH HONORS. I MARRIED A YOUNG WOMAN FROM CYLIS 12...WE HONEY-MOONED ON PHOBOS, EVENTUALLY SETTLING DOWN THERE...

MY PRACTICE FLOURISHED. I DID WELL. JEAN AND I HAD THREE CHILDREN. ALL BOYS. LIFE MOVED ALONG...I MOVED WITH IT...

ROB HONEY? (YAWN) IT'S 3 A.M.! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

NOTHING... WATCHING THE STARS...

THEN ONE DAY JUST TWO WEEKS PAST MY FORTIETH BIRTHDAY IT HAPPENED: I WAS TO ATTEND A *MEDICAL CONVENTION* ON EARTH...IN *MISSISSIPPI*...

I COULDN'T BELIEVE HOW MUCH THE LITTLE TOWN OF TARBOX HAD CHANGED. AFTER THE CONVENTION I HAILED AN AERO-CAB AND HEADED FOR OLD MAN UKELEY'S ADDRESS...

SIXTEEN BUCKS, MAC.

KEEP THE CHANGE.

TARBOX ON THE *WHOLE* HAD CHANGED RADICALLY...BUT SOME THINGS *NEVER* CHANGE...

MR. UKELEY? ARE YOU *THERE?*

RAP RAP RAP

LAWD *O'MIGHTY*, THE *WHITAKER* BOY!

MR. UKELEY! YOU *RECOGNIZED* ME!

HEH-HEH, THESE OLD ROBOT EYES STILL HAVE A *FEW* GOOD PHOTO CELLS IN 'EM! COME IN, SON! HOW YOU *BEEN?*

WE HAD A GLASS OF MR. UKELEY'S LEMONADE AND THEN HE DIDN'T KEEP ME IN SUSPENSE ANY LONGER...

SHE'S *GONE*, BOY, SHE'S *GONE*. THE GOVERNMENT'S TERMINATING ALL THE ROBOTS ON EARTH, STARTING WITH THE YOUNGEST MODELS. SEEMS LIKE PEOPLE JUST DON'T *WANT* US NO MORE. COULDN'T STAND WATCHING US STAY *YOUNG* WHILE THEY GROWED *OLD*...

TAISY...

THEY ONLY KEEP ME RUNNIN TO MAINTAIN THIS HERE PROPERTY. HEH-HEH, BUT I *FOXED* 'EM! HEH-HEH! CAN YOU KEEP A *SECRET*, BOY? COME WITH *ME!*

TOOK HER TO THE *FOUNDRY* THEY DID, GONNA MELT HER DOWN. HEH-HEH, BUT I STOLE HER BACK WHEN THEY WASN'T *LOOKIN'!*

TAISY!

SHE DON'T **WORK** NO MORE, 'COURSE. THEY TOOK OUT HER **CELLS**. SHE'S LONG SINCE RUSTED ANYHOW... BUT, I DUNNO...GIVES ME KINDA COMFORT KNOWIN' SHE'S OUT HERE KNOW WHAT I MEAN?

MR. UKELEY, **LISTEN** TO ME. **I'VE** GOT PHOTO CELLS IN MY BAG! AND **LIQUID STEEL!** IT'S **STANDARD** MEDICAL ISSUE NOW. MR. UKELEY, WE CAN BRING HER **BACK**. **WE CAN!**

WE WORKED **ALL** NIGHT. I USED EVERY DROP OF OIL AND EVERY **OUNCE** OF SKILL I'D ACQUIRED OVER THE LONG YEARS OF MY OWN PRACTICE...

Y-YOU **THINK** SO SON? SHE'S BEEN SITTIN' HERE A LONG TIME...

HAND ME THAT TORCH...

WE TOOK HER APART AND REASSEMBLED HER **THREE** TIMES. THEN, JUST AT DAWN...

I FLIPPED THE LITTLE RED SWITCH IN HER BACK...

HER EYES HALF OPENED.. HER LIPS TREMBLED ONCE...BUT THAT WAS ALL...ONLY SILENCE FOLLOWED...

THAT'S IT. I'VE DONE **ALL** I CAN. IF SHE DOESN'T RESPOND WHEN I TURN HER ON...SHE NEVER WILL.

CLICK

...R-R-SP... NGG...NG...

TOO **LATE**, MR. WHITAKER ...JEST TOO BLAMED LATE...AH SHUDDA TAKEN BETTER CARE OF HER...

WE WALKED FROM THE BARN...

THANKS FOR THE LEMONADE, MR. UKELEY...

MR. WHITAKER, SIR, *WAIT* A SPELL!

DON'T GO FEELIN' BAD ABOUT T, SON, I GOTS TO TELL YOU SOMETHIN', I BEEN THINKIN': SHE AIN'T GONE, TA SY AIN'T GONE AT ALL! SHE *WAS*, UNTIL TONIGHT, BUT WE GOT HER *BACK*, DON'T YOU SEE?

AIN'T THAT THE WAY IT IS, MR. WHITAKER; *PLEASE* TELL ME, I GOTS TO *KNOW*! I *GOTS* TO FEEL SHE'S STILL ALIVE! YOU GONNA BE GONE TOO SOMEDAY BUT I GOTS TO LIVE WITH IT *FOREVER*!

TONIGHT WHEN WE WAS WORKIN AWAY IN THERE, I HAD *HOPE* AGAIN, YES, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN *YEARS*! I HAD HOPE TAISY WOULD LIVE AGAIN AND THEN ALL A SUDDEN SHE *DID* LIVE AGAIN, IN MY *MIND*, IN MY MEMORIES! AND I THOUGHT TO MYSELF WHILE WE WAS WORKIN' IN THERE, I THOUGHT "I DON'T MATTER IF SHE WAKES UP AGAIN OR NOT 'CAUSE SHE AIN'T *NEVER* GONNA DIE IN MY MEMORIES! SHE'S GONNA BE WITH ME *ALWAYS*!

YEAH...THAT'S THE WAY IT IS, MR. UKELEY... SHE'S STILL ALIVE...

I CAUGHT A CAB BACK TO TOWN. THAT'S WHEN I SAW IT...

HEY. STOP THE CAB. LOOK AT THAT! THE *SILVER NEEDLE*! IT'S *BACK*!

YEAH, BROUGHT HER OUT OF DRY DOCK LAST WEEK. LOT OF PEOPLE *MISSED* HER, THEY SAY...

I GOT OUT AND RAN...I RAN THROUGH THE COOL SWEET GRASS OF *SUTTER'S FIELD* ...I RAN TOWARD THE ROCKETS AH, THE *ROCKETS*, ALL *SHINY* AND *TALL* AND *SILVERY* AND *GLEAMING* IN THEIR LAUNCH CRADLES... I RAN FOR ME AND *TAISY*...

Dedicated to Ray Krenkel

PRINCESS PAM

'T LOOKED *BAD*...AS BAD A WRECK AS CYNX COULD EVER REMEMBER. AND IT WAS ALL *SO UNNECESSARY.* IF HE HAD BEEN *WATCHING* HIS MISTRESS AS USUAL, IF HE HAD BEEN AT THE *CONTROLS* INSTEAD OF GIVING HIMSELF A LUBE JOB, THE ACCIDENT MIGHT HAVE BEEN PREVENTED. AT LEAST NO ONE HAD BEEN SERIOUSLY *HURT.* AT LEAST HIS MISTRESS WAS *ALIVE*...*SO FAR*...

HOW BAD *IS* IT, CYNX? DOES THE *RADIO* STILL WORK? DID YOU GET THROUGH TO *EARTH?*

A RESCUE SHIP WILL BE HERE TOMORROW, MISS PAMELA. MEANWHILE, YOU MAY *REMOVE* YOUR HELMET—MY SENSORS SHOW THE AIR IS GOOD.

JONES & STEVENS

THE *AIR,* YES...BUT WHAT ABOUT *SUSTENANCE?* WHERE WOULD HE FIND *FOOD* FOR HER ON THIS ENDLESS ROCKPILE?...CYNX SENT HIS *SCANNERS* SEARCHING FAR AND WIDE FOR SOME SIGN OF DIGESTIBLE NOURISHMENT...

I'M REALLY *TERRIBLY* SORRY, CYNX... I-I SHOULDN'T HAVE TRIED TO FLY HER *ALL* BY MYSELF...

IT WAS *MY* ERROR, MISTRESS PAM...

OH, *POO!* YOU *NEVER* ERR, CYNX, YOU'RE ALWAYS RIGHT!

(SIGH) NO, IT WAS *SILLY ME* AGAIN, FOULING THINGS UP AS USUAL! HOW DID YOU EVER GET STUCK WITH SUCH A SIMPLE-MINDED HUMAN, CYNX?

SERVING YOU IS MY *PLEASURE*, MISTRESS PAM.

...!-IT *WILL* BE ALL RIGHT, WON'T IT, CYNX? I DIDN'T DO US IN FOR *GOOD* THIS TIME, DID I?

OH, *LOOK!* *MUSHROOMS*, CYNX!

THEY LOOK DELICIOUS! BOY, I COULD EAT A *VENUSIAN SWAMP RAT*--

BEST LET ME SCAN THAT, MISTRESS...

HEY!

...FIBROUS TISSUE... TWO PERCENT THOLIAN OXIDE... MUTTER-MUTTER...

...YES... PERHAPS YOU *SHOULD* EAT... I'LL FETCH SOME UTENSILS FROM THE SHIP!

DUMB! DUMB! DUMB! I'LL BE THE DISGRACE OF THE ACADEMY WHEN THEY REPORT THIS! *OOOHH*, WHEN WILL I *LEARN?*

PERHAPS WHEN YOU'VE FINISHED WE CAN SCOUT ABOUT A BIT...MIGHT BE OTHER FORMS OF NUTRIENTS..

OF ALL THE DUMB, STUPID PLANETS FOR ME TO WRECK US ON! WHY COULDN'T IT BE GREEN AND LEAFY WITH TALL TREES AND *SPARKLING BROOKS?* Y'KNOW, AN *ENCHANTED FOREST* LIKE IN *SNOW WHITE?*

(SIGH) WOULDN'T THAT BE *LOVELY*, CYNX?

IT WOULDN'T BE A BAD LIFE, LIVING ON A LITTLE PLANET LIKE THAT... BEING A PRINCESS, WITH NO *RESPONSIBILITIES*...NOTHING TO DO BUT SIT AROUND ALL DAY AND BE *WAITED* ON! (SIGH) I'M NOT *BRIGHT* ENOUGH FOR MUCH ELSE!

HAVE ANOTHER *MUSHROOM*, MISTRESS...

THEY WALKED. CYNX WATCHED HER *CLOSELY.* THEN, GRADUALLY, THINGS BEGAN TO *CHANGE*...

CYNX *LOOK!* DOWN *THERE!* A *FOREST! RIVERS.* OH, *CYNX!*

OH, IT'S *WONDERFUL!* JUST LIKE IN *SNOW WHITE!* AND LOOK AT THE *FRUIT!*

OH, CYNX, MAYBE WE'LL FIND THE LITTLE DWARFS' COTTAGE AND THE WICKED *WITCH* AND THE *DIAMOND MINE!* HA-HA!

A *POOL!* HOW *BEAUTIFUL!*

I'VE JUST *GOT* TO WASH OFF SOME OF THIS DIESEL FUEL FROM THAT WRECK!

OOO, CHILLY! BE A PET, CYNX, AND ZIP BACK TO THE SHIP FOR MY *SHAMPOO,* HUH?

...AND THEN THE DWARFS FASHIONED A *GLASS COFFIN* FOR HER BECAUSE THEY LOVED HER SO MUCH THEY COULDN'T *BEAR* TO BURY HER... AND THEY SEALED HER *WITHIN* IT...

...AND THE *HANDSOME PRINCE* CAME AND LIFTED AWAY THE GLASS AND *KISSED* HER *AWAKE*... AND THEY LIVED *HAPPILY EVER AFTER* IN HIS *ENCHANTED CASTLE!*

ISN'T THAT A *(YAWN) NICE* LITTLE STORY, CYNX? M-M-M... SLEEPY...

...CAN'T SEEM TO *FOCUS* ON ANYTHING... DIZZY...

...CYNX... WHA...WHAT'S *HAPPENING* ...TO ME...?

...THE *MUSHROOMS*... *POISONOUS*...WH-WHY DID YOU LET ME *EAT* THEM, CYNX?...

...THE SHIP...THE *RADIO*...YOU DIDN'T GET *THROUGH*, DID YOU, CYNX? THEY'RE NOT COMING TO RESCUE US, ARE THEY?...

CYNX HURRIED BACK TO THE MANGLED FUSELAGE...THERE WERE *TOOLS* ON BOARD, AND THE HULL WAS STAINLESS STEEL...

...I...I'M NOT MAD, CYNX...I KNOW WHY... YOU DID IT... I ONLY WISH...

BANG! BANG!

...I ONLY WISH I HADN'T...DRAGGED YOU ALONG... WITH ME...

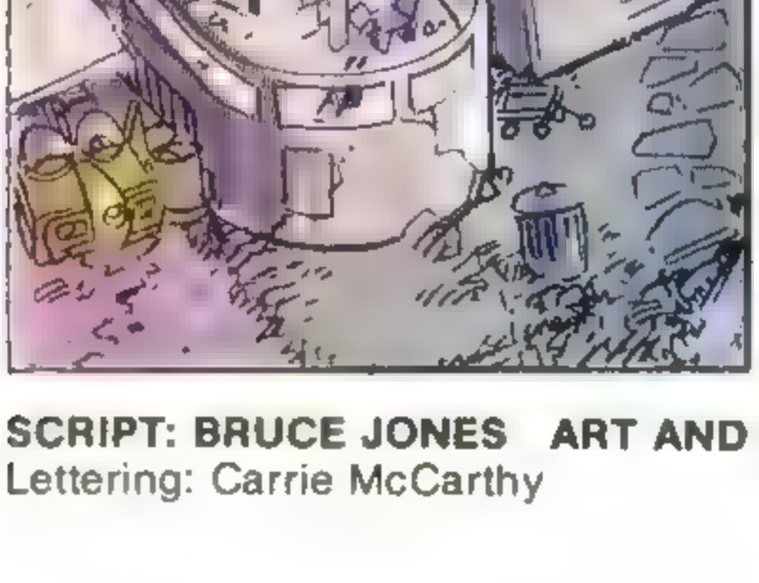
...WHAT...WILL YOU *DO*... CYNX?...WHAT...WILL YOU DO...ALL ALONE...ALL ...ALONE...

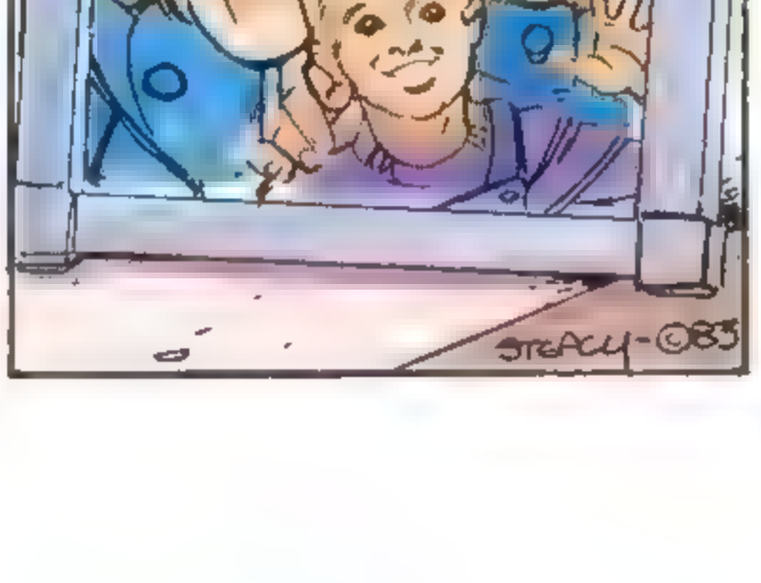
THE GENTLE BREATH *FALTERED*...THE DARK EYES *CLOSED*...THE ENCHANTED FOREST *HALLUCINATION* MELTED BACK INTO THE STONY PLAINS AND GRANITE ESCARPMENTS THAT WERE THIS LONELY LITTLE ROCKPILE...

CYNX SHUT OFF HIS SENSORS, CLOSED DOWN HIS SCANNERS, AND SETTLED HIMSELF *BESIDE* HER...AND CYNX *THOUGHT*...

...OF *DIAMOND MINES* AND *SPARKLING BROOKS* AND HANDSOME *PRINCES*...AND CYNX *PRAYED*...

ONE DAY IN OHIO





SCRIPT: BRUCE JONES ART AND COLORING: KEN STEACY
Lettering: Carrie McCarthy

"CLICK"
MEEP-MEEP!

EIGHT FIFTEEN! HAVEN'T EVEN DUSTED YET! WHERE HAS THE DAY GONE!

WASH AND SCRUB, WASH AND SCRUB, AND *STILL* THERE'S NEVER ENOUGH TIME!

--A WONDER I GET ANYTHING DONE AROUND HERE AT ALL.

HAVE TO HURRY--HAVE TO GET ROBERT TO SCHOOL!

HAVE TO DO THE SHOPPING BEFORE MRS O GETS HOME! BUSY, BUSY!

COME, ROBERT! TIME TO WAKE UP! MUST GET DRESSED FOR SCHOOL!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUT OF BED, YOU LITTLE SCAMP? COME! TIME FOR CLASSES!

NEVER HAVE A MOMENT TO MYSELF! NEVER A SECOND TO OIL MY JOINTS, LUBE MY PARTS!

LET 9 SEE NOW: POT ROAST AND PEAS, BREAD AND MILK...

CANTALOPES SEEM FRESH TODAY...

HOME AGAIN, HOME AGAIN, JIGGITY-JIG!

...CHIT-CHIT-CHITTER!

DO NOT FEED!

COME OUT THIS INSTANT! *REALLY!*

ROBERT! WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN THERE?

SIT STILL ROBERT AND BEHAVE, OR YOU'LL NOT GET A *BITE* TO EAT!

SLOWLY, ROBERT--*CHEW* YOUR FOOD. WE AREN'T CHIMPANZEES, AFTER ALL...

EAT MEAT

YOU CLEANED YOUR PLATE! GOOD BOY! COME NOW...

EAT MEAT!

YOU MAY WATCH ONE CARTOON BEFORE NAP TIME...

THAT'S ENOUGH SHENANIGANS, ROBERT! TIME FOR BED NOW!

SLEEP TIGHT...AND NO FOOLISHNESS...

SEVEN O'CLOCK, ROBERT, TIME FOR BREAKFAST!

MY, HOW THE TIME DOES FLY! BEHAVE, ROBERT!

--SCRAMBLED EGGS, BACON, ORANGE JUICE, AND--

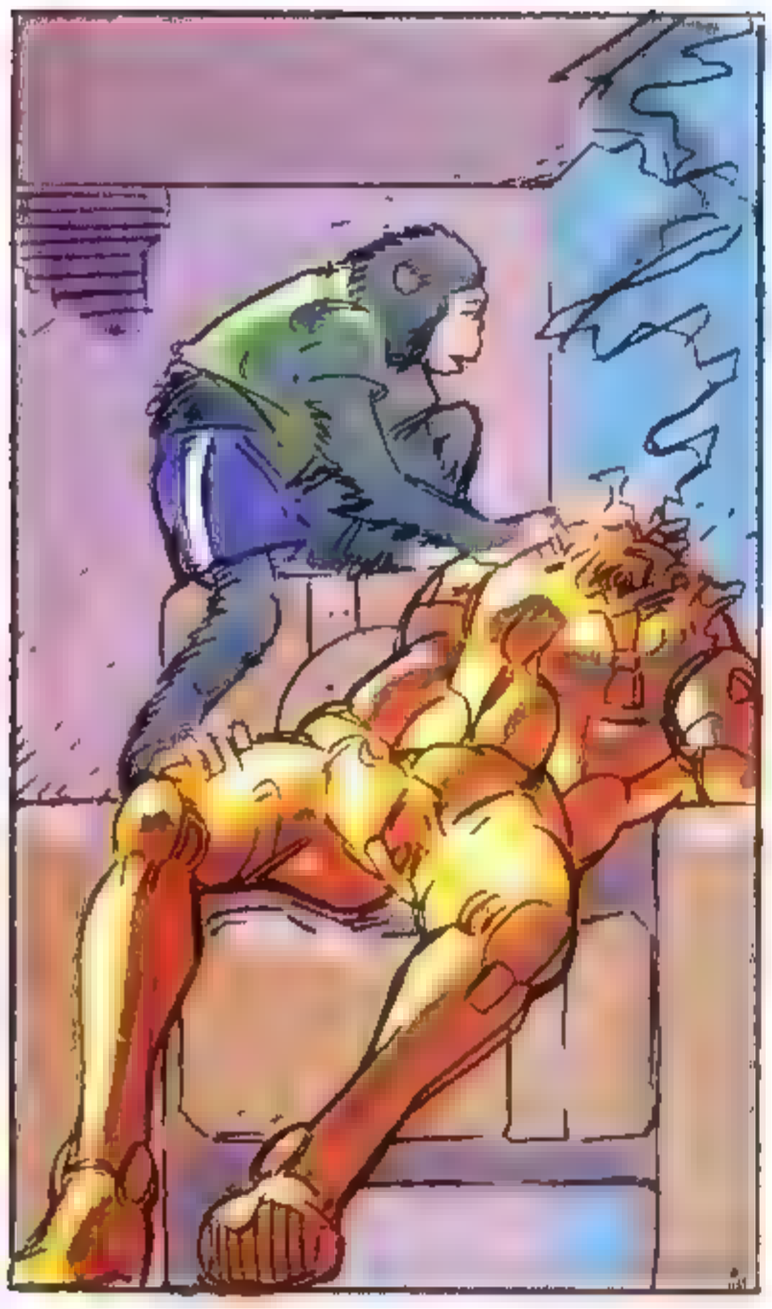
CRACK! POP! CRACKLE!

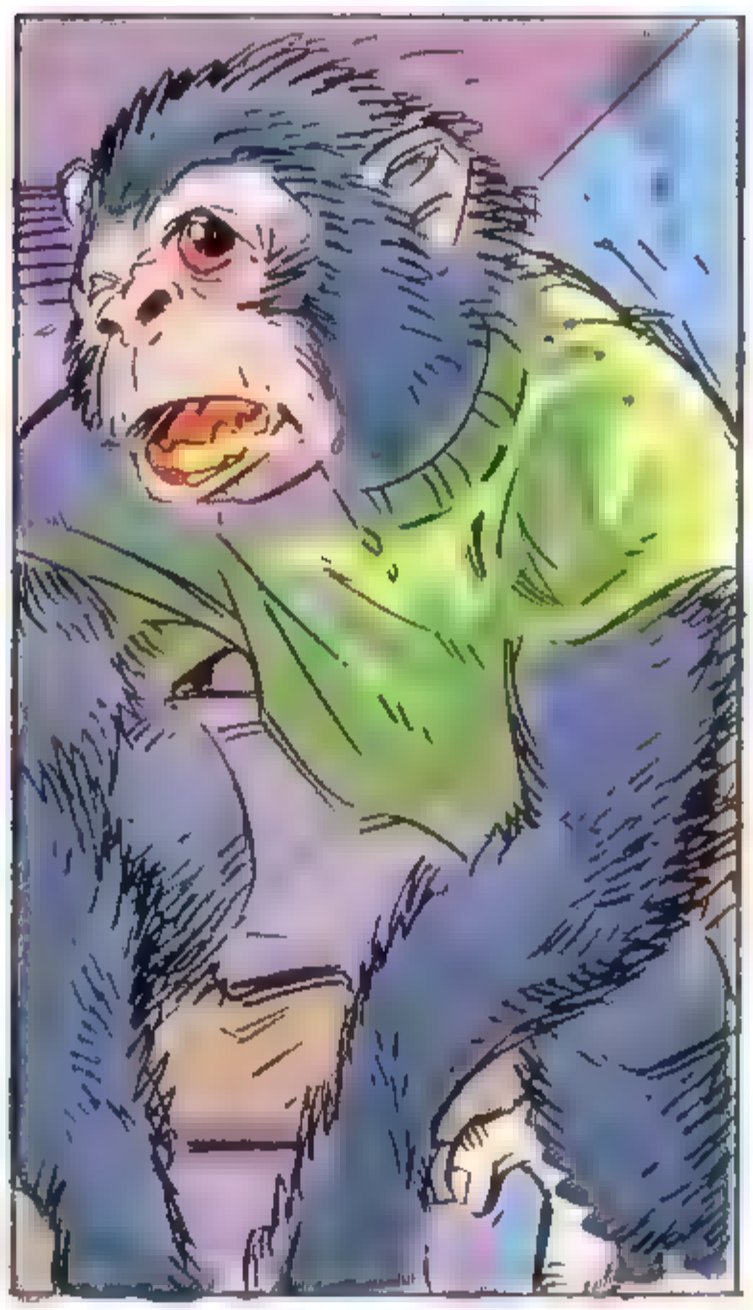
--MILK AND--

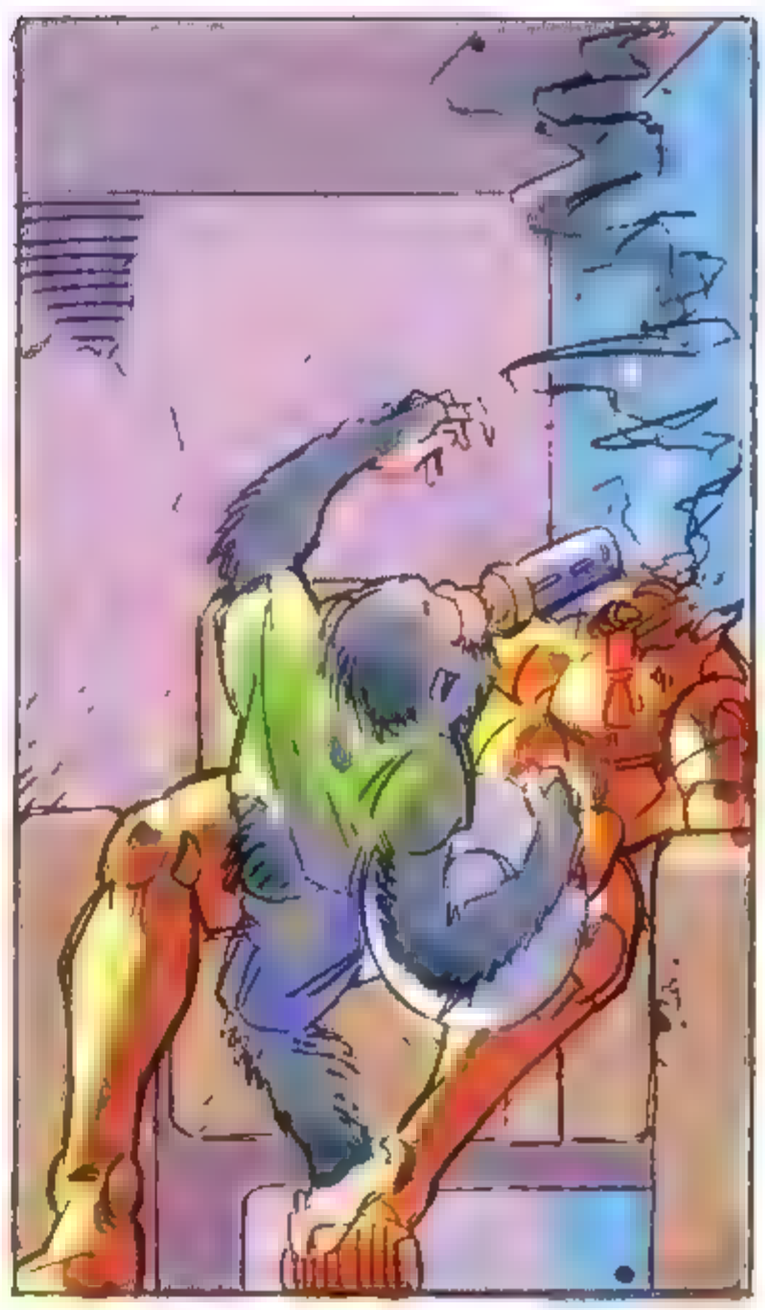
ZZZZZT!

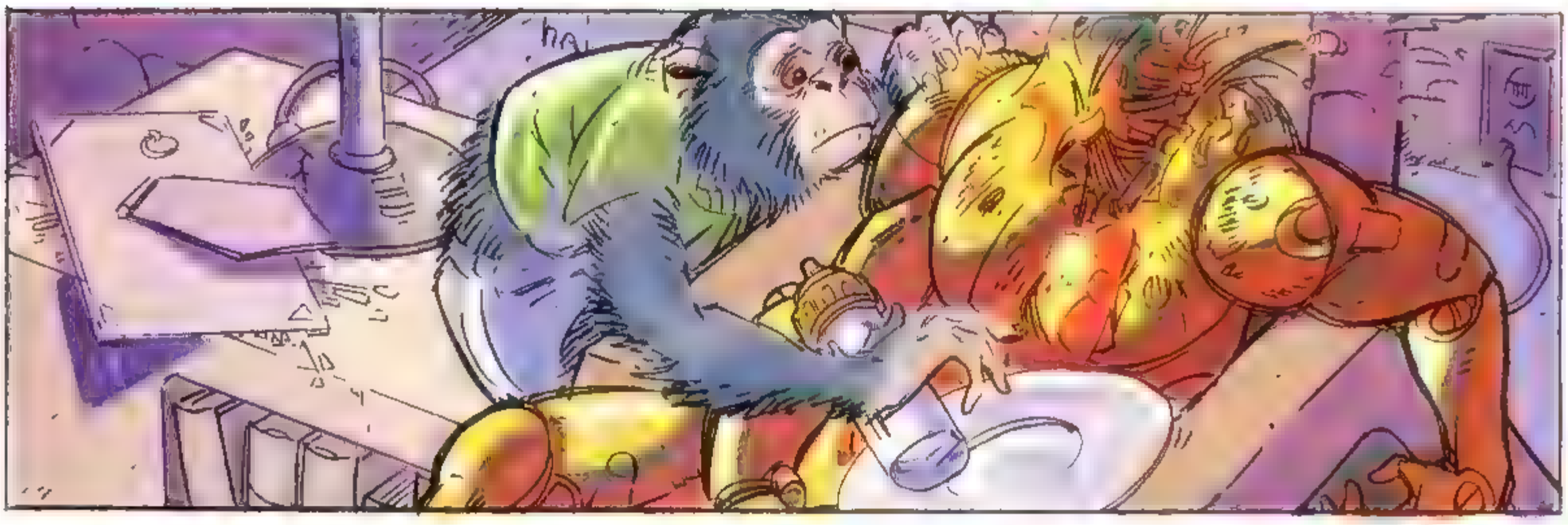
WOOSH!

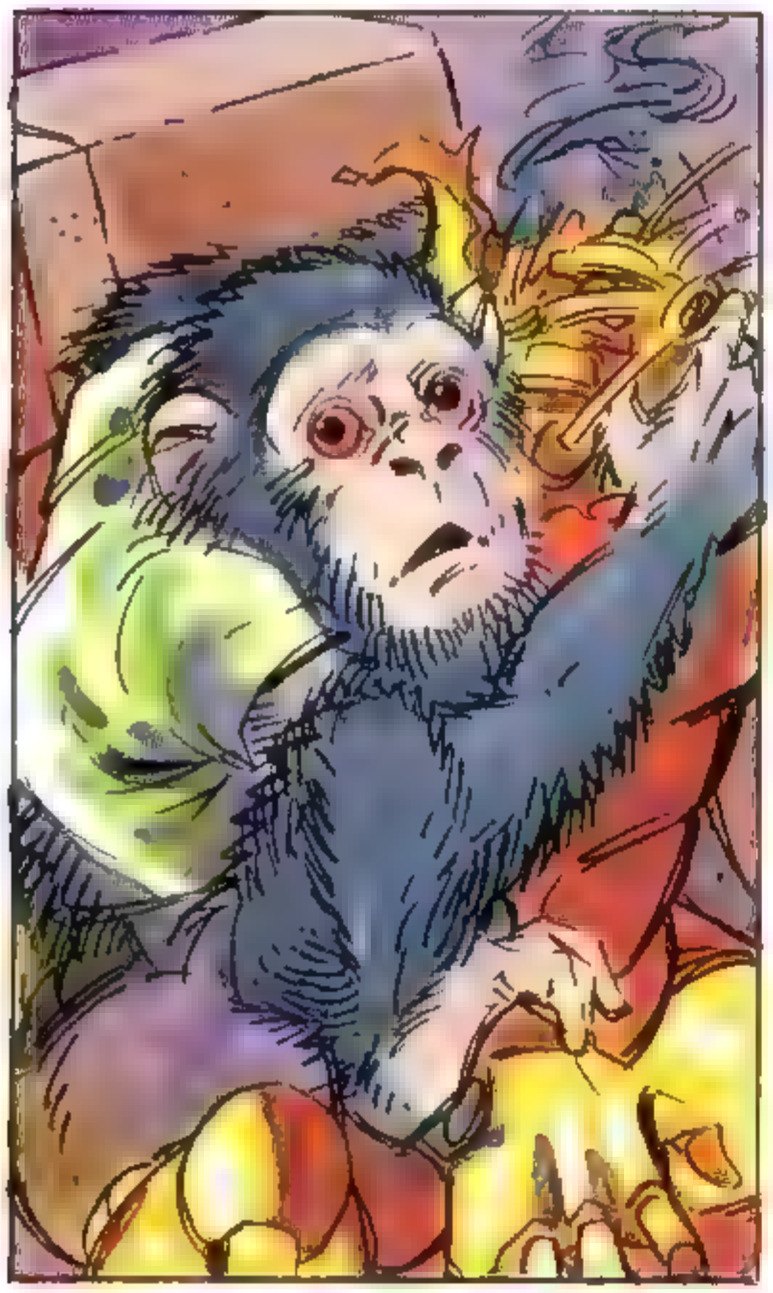
CLUMP!

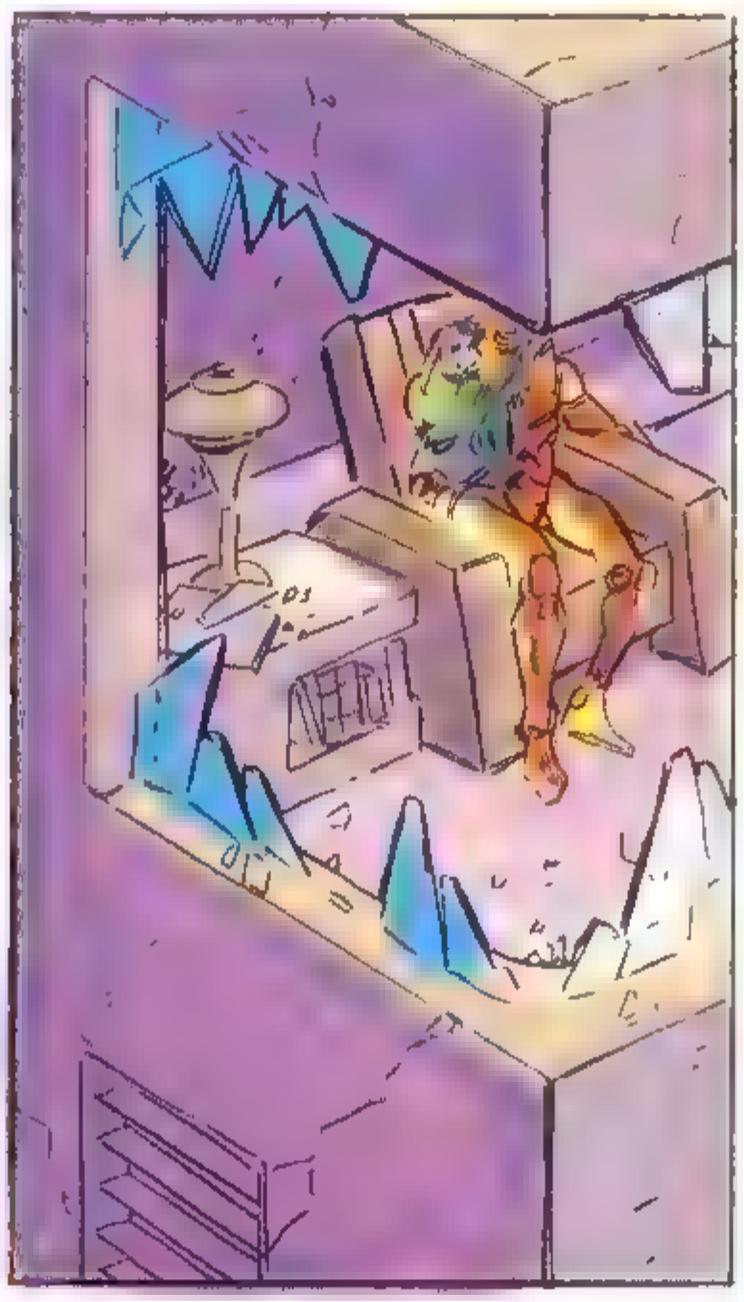


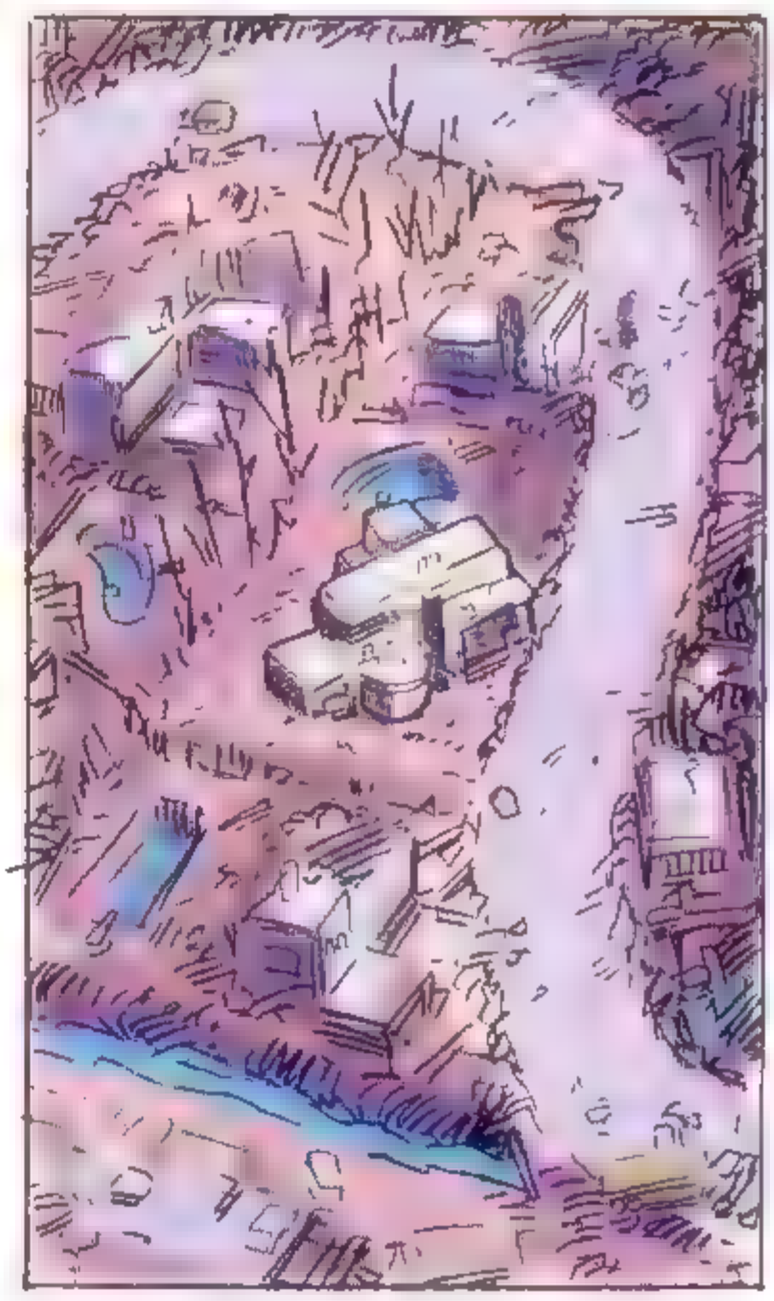












JENNY? ARE YOU AWAKE? THE DRUG SHOULD BE WEARING OFF JUST ENOUGH FOR YOU TO HEAR ME NOW

. . . HUH?

SID? IS THAT **YOU**? CAN'T **FEEL** ANYTHING – NUMB ALL OVER ... WHERE AM I – SAY, WHAT **IS** THIS?

I ONLY WANT THE **TRUTH**, JENNY. JUST TELL ME THE TRUTH AND I'LL COME **GET** YOU.

DAMN YOU SID! IS THIS YOUR IDEA OF A **JOKE**!?! GET ME OUTTA HERE THIS **INSTANT**! WHERE'S THE **SHIP**? WHERE **ARE** YOU?

JUST TELL ME YOU DIDN'T **SLEEP** WITH HIM, JENNY THAT'S ALL I WANT TO KNOW THEN I'LL COME GET YOU

YOU'RE **NUTS**, SID! YOU'RE **SICK**. YOU THINK YOU CAN JUST SLIP ME A MICKEY, STICK ME OUT HERE IN SPACE, AND THREATEN MY LIFE LIKE THIS? I'LL HAVE YOU PUT AWAY **FOREVER**, YOU JERK!

DEEP SECRETS

NO STARS . . . THAT MEANS I'M ON THE DARK SIDE OF **ALPHA CENTAURI**

YOU HAVE AT LEAST AN **HOUR** OF AIR, JENNY. I CAN GET TO YOU IN **PLENTY** OF TIME, JUST ANSWER MY QUESTION, TELL ME IT ISN'T TRUE

ANSWER MY QUESTION: **DID** YOU SLEEP WITH MY BEST FRIEND OR NOT?

YOU WANT THE **TRUTH** SID? I'LL GIVE YOU THE **TRUTH**: YOU'RE **LOUSY** IN BED, SID! IN FACT YOU **STINK**! IN THE TEN YEARS OF OUR MARRIAGE I NEVER **ONCE** ENJOYED IT! WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT **THAT** HUH?

SCRIPT: BRUCE JONES ART, COLORING, LETTERING: JEFF JONES

D.D YOU SLEEP WITH MY BEST FRIEND?

WHICH BEST FRIEND? I SLEPT WITH THEM **ALL**! YES AND A FEW YOU DIDN'T **KNOW** ABOUT! AND I **LOVED** IT, SID, I **REVELED** IN IT!

WANNA KNOW SOMETHING **ELSE**, YOU PATHETIC MORON? **ALPHA CENTAURI** IS A **SHIPPING LANE**! AND I'M RIGHT IN THE **MIDDLE** OF IT! THEY COME BY HERE EVERY **TEN MINUTES**, SID! I'LL BE P.CKED UP IN **NO** TIME. **HA-HA**! YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING RIGHT!

WHY, JENNY **WHY**?.

BECAUSE I CAN'T STAND TO HAVE YOU **TOUCH** ME! BECAUSE I CAN'T STAND EVEN THE **SIGHT** OF YOU! SO **TAKE** THE SPACE SHIP, SID, **GO**! GO **OUT** OF MY LIFE! **LEAVE**!

YOU'RE SURE THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT?..

. DON'T **NEED** YOU, SID! THEY'LL PICK ME UP ANY SECOND! I DON'T WANT TO **SEE** YOU AGAIN, S.D. **EVER**! GET THE **MESSAGE**?

I WON'T BE BACK...

GOOD! **GREAT**! **COLOSAL**! JUST LEAVE ME THE HELL **ALONE**! CAN YOU **DIG** IT, SID?

OH, I **CAN** DIG IT, JENNY –

– BUT I **WON'T**.

JENNY

LIP SERVICE

THE MORNING DEW WAS ALWAYS *PLENTIFUL* HERE ON *CYLIS 4* AND *KLETE* HAD DRUNK HIS FILL THIS DAWN. HE STRETCHED LUXURIOUSLY UNDER THE WARM TROPICAL SUN AND SHOOK A DROP OF MOISTURE FROM HIS SLEEK WING CASING.

ANOTHER DAY HAD BEGUN. A BEAUTIFUL DAY.

JOHN BOLTON '83

SOON THE DANGLEFLIES WOULD WARM THEMSELVES, DRY THEIR WINGS AND BUZZ INTO THE AIR. KLETE WOULD *SNAG* ONE OF THEM IN HIS POWERFUL FORE-CLAWS AND ENJOY A LEISURELY BREAKFAST.

HIS SWIVEL *HEAD* TURNED CONFIDENTLY ON ITS STALK-LIKE AXIS IN A NEAR 360 DEGREE CIRCLE. HIS ENORMOUS COMPOUND *EYES* SURVEYED THE LUSH JUNGLE FLORA WITH PRACTICED EASE. HE WAS *KING* OF HIS DOMAIN. THE AIR WAS *SWEET*. LIFE WAS *GOOD*.

KLETE QUIVERED *EXCITEDLY*.

SOMETHING *NEW* WAS IN THE AIR TODAY...

KLETE LIFTED HIS *WING CASING*, SPREAD THE DELICATE, *TISSUE-THIN* MEMBRANES, AND LIFTED GENTLY FROM THE BRANCH. SUNLIGHT SPLAYED ACROSS THE BLURRED MOTION OF HIS WINGS IN A RAINBOW OF PASTEL COLORS AS HE ARCED HIGH ABOVE THE VERDANT HILLS...

NOT BUILT FOR *LONG* FLIGHTS, KLETE DESCENDED WITH A LIGHT *'PLOP'* ON A NEARBY SHAFT OF PEBBLED GRANITE. HE COCKED HIS SENSITIVE HEAD. WHAT *WAS* IT? WHAT HAD *RAREFIED* THE AIR AROUND HIM, MAKING THIS MORNING *DIFFERENT* FROM ANY OTHER HE'D EVER EXPERIENCED? KLETE FELT HIMSELF *TREMBLE* WITH WEAKNESS...

SCRIPT: BRUCE JONES ART: JOHN BOLTON
Lettering: Carrie McCarthy Coloring: Joe Chiodo

CLAYBORNE? THAT *YOU*, OLD MAN?

HELLO THERE!

THANK *HEAVEN* YOU'RE HERE, OLD CHAP! SO *GOOD* TO SEE YOU! GOOD TO SEE *ANY* HUMAN FACE, IN FACT!

THE NAME *IS* BRADSHAW, AM I RIGHT?

CAN'T *TELL* YOU WHAT A PLEASURE IT IS TO SEE AN *INTELLIGENT* FACE AGAIN. ONLY BEEN ON THIS BLOODY PLANET *SIX WEEKS*, BUT I SWEAR I'VE AGED SIX *YEARS*! HERE! LET ME SHOW YOU TO YOUR *QUARTERS*!

SIX WEEKS IS THAT THE *EXTENT* OF MY TOUR HERE?

YOU'LL BE *MORE* THAN CONTENT WITH THAT, I ASSURE YOU--MOST *BORING* BLOODY ASSIGNMENT I'VE BEEN ON IN SIX YEARS WITH THE FEDERATION! NOTHING FOR A MAN TO DO HERE BUT ARGUE WITH THE NATIVES AND STARE AT THE SKY, STARE AT THE SKY AND ARGUE WITH THE NATIVES...

AH, *HERE* WE ARE!

WELL, THIS *IS* A SURPRISE! ALL THE COMFORTS OF *HOME*! I NEVER GOT ANYTHING *THIS* SWANK ON MARS!

THE COMPANY'S *BRIBE*: THEY REASON THAT IF THEY CAN KEEP A BLOKE *HAPPY* IN HIS QUARTERS, HE WON'T MIND THE *REST* OF THE BLOODY WORK SO MUCH! BEDROOM'S IN THERE, BATH OVER THIS WAY...

SPEAKING OF THE *NATIVES*, WHERE *ARE* THEY? I DIDN'T SEE A SOUL ON THE WAY IN. I THOUGHT THIS PLANET WAS *TEEMING* WITH GORGEOUS BARE-BREASTED *NYMPHETTES*!

IN A *LEPER* COLONY? *FAT CHANCE*! THE BOYS WILL BE LINING UP SOON ENOUGH, DON'T WORRY--IT'S NEARLY TIME...

FRESHEN UP A BIT AND I'LL SHOW YOU THE *GROUNDS*!

KLETE STOOD *PATIENTLY* ON THE SUN-SPLASHED ROCK, FRONT CLAWS TUCKED IN FRONT OF HIM LIKE GLEAMING SCYTHES. THE MORNING BREEZE CARRIED AN *EXCITING* NEW ODOR WITH IT THIS DAY. HIS SLENDER THORAX PULSED IN *ANTICIPATION* AS A LOW *DRUMMING* FILLED THE AIR...

A *BULBOUS SHAPE* EMERGED FROM BEHIND A WALL OF FERNS, ITS ENORMOUS WINGS ROWING THE AIR IN A GREEN BLUR. KLETE WAITED FOR THE PRECISE MOMENT OF CONTACT-- THEN *SPRANG!*

...QUITE *SIMPLE*, REALLY, YOU MERELY SIT BEHIND THIS DESK AND MAKE SURE NOBODY COMES OUT OF THE COLONY AND THAT ONLY *LEGALLY ACCEPTABLE PERSONNEL* ARE ALLOWED TO ENTER.

WHAT CONTITUTES *'LEGALLY ACCEPTABLE PERSONNEL'?*

ONE CARRING THIS *CARD* WITH HIS NAME AND NUMBER PRINTED ON IT. MAKE SURE YOU CHECK *BOTH!* THESE BLOODY ALIENS ALL LOOK THE *SAME!* CAN'T TELL ONE FROM THE *NEXT!*

AND *WHATEVER* YOU DO, DON'T UNDER *ANY* CIRCUMSTANCES GO *BEYOND* THAT GATE YOURSELF! ONCE INSIDE THOSE WALLS, YOU'RE EXPOSED TO A HIGHLY CONTAGIOUS FORM OF *INCURABLE LEPROSY!*

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE *CARD-CARRYING* NATIVES? WHO ARE *THEY?* WON'T *THEY* CONTRACT THE DISEASE?

THEY'RE *RELATIVES* OF THE POOR WRETCHES INSIDE, AND THEY *WON'T* CONTRACT THE DISEASE BECAUSE A LABORATORY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PLANET HAS *CHECKED* THEIR BLOOD FOR THEM AND DETERMINED THEM *IMMUNE*. THAT'S WHY THEY'VE BEEN *ISSUED* THE CARDS...

IT SEEMS THAT A FEW OF THESE MISERABLE CREATURES HAVE A *BUILT-IN* DEFENSE AGAINST THE LEPROSY. THE FEDERATION ALLOWS THEM *VISITING* PRIVILEGES--BUT *ONLY* IF THEY HAVE THEIR CARDS! NO CARD, NO ENTRY --*REMEMBER* THAT!

AUTHORISATION

KLETE SAT HUNCHED OVER THE PARTIALLY-DEVOURED BEETLE CARCASS, MANDIBLES CLICKING *GREEDILY* AT THE SWEET, JUICY PULP HE'D EXTRACTED FROM THE CARAPACE. IT HAD BEEN A *GOOD* KILL...KLETE WAS *SATIATED*...

YET EVEN AS HE COMPLETED HIS MEAL, HIS DIAMOND-SHAPED HEAD SWIVELED TOWARD THE SKIES ONCE MORE, SENSITIVE MEMBRANES QUIVERING IN THE MORNING BREEZE. THIS WAS *NOT* THE ANSWER TO HIS LONGING--THIS WAS *NOT* WHAT WAS TO MAKE THIS DAY DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHERS...

SOMETHING WAS *WAITING*--SOMETHING JUST OUTSIDE HIS RANGE OF VISION--SOMETHING *DARK* AND *MYSTERIOUS* THAT WOULD CHANGE HIS LIFE FOREVER. KLETE QUIT THE BEETLE CARCASS AND VENTURED AGAIN INTO THE SURROUNDING FOREST...

YOU MEAN THE *ENTIRE JOB* CONSISTS OF SITTING BEHIND THAT DESK ALL DAY AND CHECKING NATIVE ENTRY CARDS? THAT'S *IT*?

AS I SAID, YOU'LL BE *BORED* TO TEARS INSIDE A WEEK. THESE PEOPLE ARE REMARKABLY SLOW-WITTED. IT'S HOPELESS ATTEMPTING TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEM VERBALLY. IF THE FEDERATION DIDN'T REGULATE THEM TO SOME DEGREE, THE *ENTIRE PLANET* WOULD BE LEPEROUS.

THEY'RE REMOVING A DEAD LEPER--THERE'S NO *CURE* FOR THE AFFLICTED. POOR WRETCH.

WHAT'S *THAT*?

DON'T WORRY...ONCE THE VICTIM IS DEAD, THE DISEASE IS *NON-CONTRACTIBLE*. WE'RE PERFECTLY *SAFE*. THEY'LL BURY HIS BODY AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST...

WHEW! NOT A PRETTY SIGHT! WHAT A *JOB*!

IT'LL BE *OVER* IN SIX WEEKS, PERHAPS THEN THE FEDERATION WILL SEE FIT TO GIVE YOU A MORE APPETIZING ASSIGNMENT, AS THEY HAVE ME.

WELL, I'M *OFF*! ROCKET'S *WAITING*! GOOD *LUCK*, OLD SPORT! CHIN UP! KEEP BUSY!

KEEP BUSY... YEAH... *SURE*...

KLETE SOARED *HIGH* ABOVE THE JUNGLE CANOPY, SHAFTS OF SUNLIGHT EVAPORATING THE MORNING MIST AHEAD OF HIM THROUGH A RAINBOW CURTAIN. HIS ENTIRE BODY *QUIVERED* WITH PENT-UP EMOTION, THE SENSATION MOUNTING WITH EVERY SWEEP OF HIS WINGS. ANY *MOMENT* NOW...ANY *MOMENT* THE *ANSWER* WOULD BE AT HAND...

AND THEN IT *HAPPENED*...

KLETE TWISTED ABOUT IN *SURPRISE*. HE FLAPPED HIS WINGS IN A CONCENTRATED FURY. BUT THEY WERE *HELD FAST*... AS WERE HIS LEGS AND BODY. A TREMBLE PASSED ALONG THE SILKEN SNARE...THE WEB'S *OWNER* WAS APPROACHING...

I SAID NO CARD, NO *ENTRY*! DO YOU *HEAR* ME? *NO ENTRY*! *GO AWAY*! YOU'LL CONTRACT THE *DISEASE*, DUMMY!

GOD, THESE PEOPLE ARE *THICK*!

LORD, *LOOK* AT THEM! YOU'D THINK THEY HAD NOTHING BETTER TO DO WITH THEIR TIME!

HERE! *HERE*! BREAK THAT UP!

KNOCK IT OFF, YOU TWO! THERE'S NO NEED FOR FIGHTING AS LONG AS YOU'VE GOT A *CARD*!

THAT EYE LOOKS PRETTY *BAD*, BETTER COME INSIDE AND WE'LL PUT SOMETHING ON IT!

YOU GO ON HOME! YOU *HEAR* ME? *GO HOME*! YOU DON'T HAVE A *CARD*!

KLETE WAS NOT *TRULY* INTELLIGENT...HIS BRAIN WAS NOT *LARGE* ENOUGH FOR REAL THOUGHT. BUT, AS INSECTS GO, HIS KIND WERE KNOWN FOR THEIR CUNNING AND SKILL...

STILL, IT WAS NOT TRUE PLANNING THAT WAS TO SAVE HIS LIFE THIS DAY... IT WAS THAT BASIC EMOTION KNOWN TO ALL LIVING THINGS... *FEAR!*

FEAR GENERATED *MOVEMENT*, MOVEMENT GOVERNED THOSE POWERFUL HIND LEGS--LEGS SERRATED WITH RAZOR-SHARP BLADES, LEGS MEANT FOR JUMPING, BUT WHICH NOW SERVED AS AN EFFICIENT *CUTTING* EDGE...

...AN EDGE THAT GAVE THE FINAL *EDGE* TO KLETE! THE SPIDER *LEAPT*, THE WEB *PARTED*, THE POISONOUS MANDIBLES CLOSED ON *EMPTY* AIR AND TERRIFIED PRAYING MANTIS LIVED TO FIGHT *ANOTHER* DAY...

THAT'S QUITE A *SHINER* YOU'VE GOT YOURSELF, BUSTER! GOING TO BE SWOLLEN SHUT FOR ABOUT A WEEK I'D SAY.

HERE, WE'D BETTER PUT A PATCH ON IT TO KEEP OUT THE SUN AND THE INSECTS...

YES, YES, YOU'VE GOT YOUR *CARD*, YOU CAN GO IN...

GOD, WHAT A *JOB!* ANOTHER WEEK OF *THIS* AND I'LL BE READY FOR A *STRAITJACKET!*

WHAT'S THIS, *MORE* DEAD? ALL RIGHT, TAKE THEM TO THE JUNGLE AND PUT THEM UNDER, I'LL FILL OUT A REPORT.

STRANGE...MEN--THEY'RE ALL *MEN*...I HAVEN'T SEEN A WOMAN SINCE I ARRIVED HERE...H-M-M.

BEEP
BEEP
BEEP

TOP O' THE MORNING, OLD CHAP! WAKE YOU, DID I? IT'S PAST ELEVEN!

BRADSHAW! DAMN! IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU! WHERE ARE YOU?

ABOUT 70 PARSECS FROM YOU ON A LITTLE ASTROID CALLED BETA 5X. YOU WON'T *BELIEVE* THE SCENERY AROUND HERE...HERE, I'LL STEP ASIDE...

HOLY SH.--

YES, RATHER A *DEPARTURE* FROM MY LAST ASSIGNMENT, WOULDN'T YOU SAY? AND SUCH *FRIENDLY* PEOPLE, TOO. THEY WOULDN'T DREAM OF LETTING YOU SLEEP *ALONE* AT NIGHT.

HOW FARES IT WITH *YOU*, OLD BEAN?

AS IF YOU DON'T *KNOW*...I WAKE UP, EAT BREAKFAST, GO TO THE OFFICE, AND WADE THROUGH A LINE OF EAGER ALIEN VISITORS, MOST OF WHOM DON'T HAVE VISITOR CARDS AND *ALL* OF WHOM ARE THE *MALE* OF THE SPECIES. WHERE ARE ALL THE *WOMEN* ON THIS PLANET, ANYWAY?

CURIOUS, ISN'T IT? MY GUESS IS THAT THE HUSBANDS KEEP THE WIVES AT HOME DOING THE HOUSEWORK. CYLIS 4 ISN'T WHAT YOU'D CALL A *LIBERATED* PLANET, YOU KNOW. WELL, I'VE GOT TO RUN--*HEH-HEH*--LOTS OF *WORK* TO DO, YOU KNOW! *CHIN UP!* KEEP *BUSY!*

NUTS!

MORE DEAD, HUH? OKAY, LET ME GET HIS NAME AND CARD NUMBER...

WAIT! WAIT SECOND! I KNOW THIS MAN I PUT THAT PATCH ON HIS EYE ONLY A FEW DAYS AGO. WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? HE WASN'T A LEPER! HE HAD A CARD!

AUTHORISATION

I WANT A SAMPLE OF THIS GUY'S BLOOD! SOMETHING SCREWY HERE!

...NOW I COMPARE THE DEAD ALIEN'S BLOOD WITH THAT OF A NORMAL--

HEY! WHAT TH--THIS CAN'T BE RIGHT.

GREETINGS, AGAIN, OLD BEAN! WHAT NEWS FROM THE VALLEY OF THE LEPERS?

BRADSHAW, I'VE GOT TO TALK TO YOU! THERE'S SOMETHING WEIRD ABOUT THIS PLACE! I JUST EXAMINED THE BLOOD OF A DEAD LEPER AGAINST THAT OF A NORMAL LIVING NATIVE -- THERE'S NO DIFFERENCE! THE COUNT IS THE SAME, THE TUBE IS IDENTICAL, NO LEPROUS STRAIN DISCERNABLE! THE DEAD MAN WAS PERFECTLY HEALTHY!

HEALTHY? THEN WHAT KILLED HIM?

WHAT INDEED? I CHECKED THE CORPSE'S EXTERIOR AS WELL, THE DESTROYED TISSUE HADN'T BEEN ALTERED BY DISEASE, BRADSHAW, IT LOOKED MORE LIKE IT HAD BEEN--TORN AWAY! AND IN EVERY CASE OF DEATH HERE, IT'S ALWAYS THE HEAD AND SHOULDERS THAT ARE AFFECTED... WHY WOULD A DISEASE LIKE LEPROSY RESTRICT ITSELF TO THE SAME AREAS REPEATEDLY?

MMM...NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT, I SEEM TO RECALL ALL OF MY PATIENTS BEING AFFECTED IN SIMILAR WAYS...

WHAT'S THE NUMBER OF CENTRAL CONTROL ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PLANET? I WANT TO CHECK WITH THEM--GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS...

THERE IS NO NUMBER, OLD MAN, THAT OUTPOST IS STRICTLY TOP SECRET. YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN OUT THERE UNTIL RELIEF ARRIVES IN TWO WEEKS.

GIVE ME A FEW DAYS, THOUGH --I'VE GOT A FRIEND AT CENTRAL CONTROL MAYBE HE CAN FIND OUT SOMETHING FOR US. I'LL CALL YOU...

KLETE RESTED QUIETLY ON A LEAFY BOUGH, GENTLY LICKING HIS BACK LEGS WHERE THE FINE SPIDER WEB HAD LEFT A STICKY RESIDUE. *NEVER* WOULD HE BE SO CARELESS AGAIN. IT HAD NEARLY COST HIM HIS *LIFE*...

HE *SENSED* RATHER THAN FELT THE CHANGE IN THE AIR... THE DEEP MUSKY *AROMA* WASHING OVER HIM FROM THE TREE TOPS... THE GENTLE WHIR OF TISSUE-THIN WINGS THAT THRUMMED OUT OF THE CLOUDS ABOVE...

AND THEN KLETE *KNEW*...KNEW IT WITH A CERTAINTY THAT SENT HIS HEART *CRASHING*, HIS MANDIBLES *TWITCHING*... THAT WHICH HE HAD WAITED FOR ALL THIS DAY--ALL HIS *LIFE*--WAS COMING...THE ETERNAL MOMENT HAD ARRIVED...HIS DESTINY WAS AT *HAND*...

IT'S *CRAZY!* I'VE CHECKED OVER A *DOZEN* BLOOD SAMPLES FROM BOTH *HEALTHY* ALIENS AND *LEPEROUS* CORPSES, AND EACH TIME THEY CHECK OUT *IDENTICALLY!*

THE LEPROSY IS A *HOAX!* THIS PLANET IS *CLEAN!* THERE *IS* NO DISEASE!

BUT IF NOT A *LEPER* COMPOUND, THEN *WHAT?* COULD THE FEDERATION BE *HIDING* SOME TOP SECRET INSTALLATION HERE? AND WHY ALL THESE *CARD-CARRYING*, IGNORANT ALIEN NATIVES? THESE POOR BRUTES AREN'T INTELLIGENT ENOUGH TO BE USED FOR ANYTHING REQUIRING BRAINS...

...AND WHY THE STEADY STREAM OF *MUTILATED BODIES?* WHAT IN THE WORLD IS *HAPPENING* TO THESE CREATURES IN THERE? ARE THEY BEING *EXPERIMENTED* ON FOR SOME BIZARRE REASON?

ONE SURE WAY TO *FIND OUT*...

MY GOD! THIS IS NO LEPER COLONY! I'VE NEVER *SEEN* ANYTHING SO BEAUTIFUL!...

IT'S LIKE A FAIRY TALE TOWN! THOSE QUAINT LITTLE COTTAGES...SO INVITING... ALMOST INTOXICATING...AND THAT MUSKY ODOR, DELICIOUS! IS IT FROM THE FLOWERS?...

S-SHE'S *BEAUTIFUL*...ABSOLUTELY *BEAUTIFUL*! I-I MUST *HAVE HER*... I *MUST*...C-CAN'T *STOP* MYSELF! ...M-MUST *POSSESS* HER!

CLAYBORNE! I'VE CHECKED WITH MY FRIEND AT *CENTRAL CONTROL*--HE HAS ACCESS TO *PRIVILEGED* INFORMATION! CLAYBORNE, THE COMPOUND-- IT'S A BLOODY *BREEDING COLONY!* IT'S HOW THOSE CREATURES *REPRODUCE!* THE FEDERATION KEEPS IT UNDER *CONTROL* SO THE WHOLE BLEEDING POPULATION DOESN'T *DESTROY* ITSELF! FOR GOD'S SAKE, STAY *OUT* OF THE *COMPOUND!* CLAYBORNE, DO YOU *HEAR* ME? ARE YOU *THERE?*

KLETE FELT AS IF HIS WHOLE BODY WOULD TREMBLE ITSELF APART. WITH A *DELIBERATION* AND *IGNORANCE* THAT BEFITTED HIS SPECIES, HE MOUNTED THE GLEAMING FEMALE BEFORE HIM AND FELT HIMSELF *DISSOLVE* INTO HER...

NO MATTER THAT EVEN AS HE DID SO, THE GREEDY FEMALE *TURNED* HER SWIVEL HEAD AND *SANK* HER *MANDIBLES* INTO HIS EYE, TEARING OUT GREAT CHUNKS OF THE DELICATE FLESH WITH EVERY *MOUTHFUL*...

NO MATTER THAT EVEN AFTER HIS *HEAD* AND *NECK* WERE *GONE*, HE CONTINUED TO THRUST *EAGERLY* UNTIL BOTH MIND AND BODY WERE SWEPT AWAY IN A TORRENT OF PASSION AND BLOOD. FOR KLETE HAD FOUND HIS *ETERNITY*... KLETE HAD BECOME *IMMORTAL* ...THE *WAITING* WAS OVER AT LAST...

G·A·M·E·W·A·R·S

PLASTIC

"THE FEW MUST DIE, SO THE MANY MAY SURVIVE"...THAT WAS OUR MOTTO. WE HIT THE MOLAK PATROL UNIT JUST PAST NOON. WE CAUGHT THEM UNAWARES, SLUMPED OVER THEIR SKELP CANS, TAKING FIVE. EVEN THEIR LOOKOUT WAS FEEDING HIS FACE. IT WAS ALL OVER PRETTY QUICK, I MEAN, MOST OF THE PLATOON HAD TAKEN OFF THEIR POON-SHOES TO COOL THEIR FEET, SO J.J. AND I JUST KNOCKED THOSE POOR SLOBS INTO THE GOO. THE REST OF THEM WE PUT AWAY WITH OUR CANNONS...

IT HAD BEEN RAINING FOR ABOUT SIX WEEKS STRAIGHT--NOT UNUSUAL FOR THIS PLANET--SO WHEN THE ENEMY HIT THE GOO, HE STUCK FAST AND SUNK FASTER...

I CAUGHT THE LAST OF THEM WITH MY LASER-GIG AND THE SHELF WAS OURS...

SCRIPT: BRUCE JONES ART: ADOLPHO BUYLLA
Lettering: Ed King Color: Joe Chiodo

WE WALKED 'ROUND AND 'ROUND THE ENEMY, WATCHING THEM SINK INTO THE PLANET... I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE RESTED A MINUTE, GRABBED A BUTT, BUT THE MOLAKS HAD EATEN ALL THE SKELPS ON THIS SHELF...I ONLY HAD A HANDFUL LEFT IN MY RATION CAN...

HOW FAR TO THE NEXT SHELF?

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? YOU DON'T GOT NO CHOICE 'BOUT IT. HAVE SOME SKELP...

I DON'T WANT ANY GODDAM SKELP, ARCH.! I WANNA KNOW HOW FAR TO THE NEXT SHELF!

OKAY, OKAY... CHRIST! SIX MILES, OKAY? SIX MILES...

GOD, I'LL NEVER MAKE IT, ARCH...

YOU'LL MAKE IT, J.J....

MY FEET ARE LIKE LEAD WEIGHTS *NOW!*

SURE YOU DON'T WANT SOME SKELP?

I UNSCREWED MY PLASTIC RASH-CAN...THE TINY SQUIRMING SKELP LEAPT INTO MY MOUTH...

GOD, HOW DO YOU ***EAT*** THOSE THINGS? ***AGH!***

YOU WANT ME TO STARVE OR WHAT?

BESIDES, THEY ***LIKE*** TO BE EATEN! IT MAKES THEM HAPPY!

IT MAKES ME ***SICK!*** LOOK, THOSE TWO MISSED YOUR 'MOUTH...THEY'RE BURROWING INTO THE MUD! CHRIST! I DON'T KNOW WHICH IS ***WORSE!***

BETTER HAVE SOME-- LONG WAY TO THE NEXT SHELF!

GET THAT SLIMY CRAP ***AWAY*** FROM ME!

WE REACHED POINT LOMA AT 0:600...THERE WAS A FRESH SUPPLY OF SKELP WAITING FOR US...

GOD, I'M ***DEAD***...

HMPH! NOT YET YER NOT, SON...HELP ME SET UP THE TENT, I WANNA BUTT, BAD...

PLASTIC'S GOT A HOLE IN IT...

PLASTIC! CHRIST! PLASTIC TENTS, PLASTIC CLOTHES, PLASTIC BOOTS, PLASTIC GUNS...EVEN THE GODDAMN STINKIN', SLIMY, ***FOOD*** TASTES LIKE PLASTIC! THE WHOLE STINKIN' ***WORLD*** IS PLASTIC--PLASTIC AND ***MUD!***

YOU KNOW WHAT THAT BUTT YER SMOKIN' IS MADE OF, ARCH? ***PLASTIC!*** THAT'S RIGHT! PLASTIC FIBERS WOVEN THROUGH TOBACCO! AND THEY MAKE 'EM FROM SKELP HIDES! YEAH, THOSE LITTLE ANIMALS YOU LIKE SO MUCH!

THEY HAVE TO PUT PLASTIC IN 'EM TO KEEP 'EM DRY--GOVERNMENT ISSUE.

AND OUR GUNS, OUR CLOTHING--AIN'T EVEN ***REAL*** PLASTIC, IT'S ALL FROM SKELP HIDES!

YOU GRAB SOME SHUT-EYE, I'LL STAND WATCH!

...TRUDGE AND FIGHT...TRUDGE AND FIGHT... ON TO THE NEXT LITTLE SHELF, THEN TRUDGE AND FIGHT SOME MORE...

...(SIGH) AND IF YOU CLIMB ON ENOUGH SHELVES, THEY GIVE YOU A BADGE...JEEZ...

POOR JIMMY JOE...BATTLE FATIGUE, I SCOOPED OUT A HANDFUL OF FRESH SKELP FROM THE GOVERNMENT CONTAINER AND LET THEM JUMP INTO MY MOUTH. ONE OF THEM FELL DOWN MY CHIN, HIT THE SHELF AND SCAMPERED INTO THE MUD OUTSIDE THE PUP TENT...

THE ENEMY HIT US ABOUT TWILIGHT...

MY *RIFLE!* OH, CHRIST, MY *RIFLE!*

NEVER MIND YOUR GUN! GRAB YOUR CELLO-TORCH!

THAT WAS THE FIRST AND LAST TIME I EVER SAW JIMMY JOE GO NUTS...

YAGGGGGGHHHH!

THAT BOY WAS PLUMB OUT OF HIS HEAD...

JIMMY JOE! THAT KNIFE AIN'T GONNA DO NO GOOD!

PLASTIC, PLASTIC, PLASTIC!

I WORKED A PLASTIC BOMB LOOSE FROM MY BELT AND FLUNG IT AT THE CENTER OF THE SWIRLING MASS OF BODIES...

WHUMP!

BASTARDS! BASTARDS! TRYING TO GET TO OUR SHELF!

EASY, BOY... THEY WON'T NEED NO SHELVES WHERE THEY'RE GOIN...

(SOB-SOB) OUR TENT, ARCH! IT'S RUINED! WE GOT NO WAY TO GET OUT OF THE *RAIN* NOW!

IT'S ONLY ANOTHER HUNDRED MILES TO THE NEXT **CO** STATION... WE CAN GET A NEW TENT THERE...

I DON'T *WANT* TO GO TO THE GODDAMN **CO** STATION! I WANNA STAY *HERE!* I WANNA BE DRY! *I WANNA BE DRY!*

EASY, KID!

WE SET OUT FOR THE NEXT SHELF AT 0:920... I DIDN'T LIKE THE WAY JIMMY JOE WAS ACTIN'...

HOW LONG YOU BEEN FIGHTIN' ON THIS PLANET, ARCH... BEFORE YOU TEAMED UP WITH ME, I MEAN?

OH... THREE, FOUR YEARS, I GUESS...

AND HOW LONG SINCE YOU SEEN A **CO** STATION? HOW LONG SINCE YOU SEEN *ANYTHING* EXCEPT MUD AND SHELVES, SHELVES AND MUD?

WHAT'RE YOU DRIVIN' AT, BOY?

WHAT IF THERE AIN'T NO **CO** STATIONS NO MORE? WHAT IF THE ENEMY BURNED THEM ALL? WHAT IF THEY *WON?*

ONLY THEY KEPT THE WAR GOIN' *ANYWAY!*... KEPT US TRUDGIN' AND FIGHTIN' AND MOVIN' FORWARD, ON AND ON, ALWAYS FORWARD TOWARD THE NEXT *SHELF!*

YOU'RE NUTS! WHY WOULD THEY WANNA DO THAT?

"THE FEW MUST DIE SO THE MANY MAY SURVIVE"... I WONDER WHO STARTED THAT MOTTO, ARCH?

WE RAN INTO A SMALL PATROL LATER THAT NIGHT. THEY WEREN'T NO REAL PROBLEM, BUT OLD JIMMY JOE WASN'T ALL THAT MUCH HELP EITHER...

I THOUGHT FOR A WHILE THERE HE WASN'T GOING TO MAKE IT TO THE NEXT SHELF...

YOU OKAY, JIMMY JOE?...

...TIRED...TIRED...

WE WERE EXHAUSTED. DESPITE THE HEAVY RAIN AND NO PROTECTION, I NODDED RIGHT OFF...

WHEN I WOKE UP...JIMMY JOE WAS GONE...

JIMMY JOE! WHERE ARE YA? JIMMY JOE?

I FOUND HIM A FEW MINUTES LATER...BUT OF COURSE IT WAS TOO LATE...HE'D STOOD STILL TOO LONG, JUST STARIN' UP AT THE FALLIN' RAIN WITH HIS MOUTH OPEN...

JIMMY JOE! NO!

...PLASTIC (HEH-HEH) ...RAIN TASTES LIKE PLASTIC, ARCH...

WHY, JIMMY JOE? WHY??

...(HEH-HEH) FIGURED IT OUT LAST NIGHT, ARCH (HEH-HEH) AIN'T NO SENSE IN WAITIN'... CAN'T BEAT 'EM (HEH-HEH) MAY AS WELL JOIN 'EM!...

THERE WAS NUTHIN' I COULD DO...IF YOU STAND STILL FOR MORE THAN TEN SECONDS IN THAT STUFF, YOU'RE GONE FOR GOOD...IT'S LIKE QUICKSAND...

JIMMY JOE...

...THEY WON, ARCH (HEH-HEH) RIGHT UNDER OUR NOSES!

I STOOD THERE FOR A LONG TIME AFTER JIMMY JOE'S HEAD HAD GONE UNDER. HE WAS PRETTY FAR-OUT THERE AT THE LAST, BUT SOMETHING ABOUT HIS WORDS CHILLED ME.

IT **HAD** BEEN MONTHS SINCE I'D SEEN A **CO** STATION... WHERE HAD THEY ALL GONE? AND IF THERE WEREN'T ANY MORE **CO**'S, WHERE WERE ALL THOSE FRESH SUPPLIES OF SKELP COMIN' FROM -- THE ENEMY?

SOMETHIN' WAS **WEIRD** ALL RIGHT...BUT I DIDN'T GET THE CHANCE TO THINK ABOUT IT ANYMORE...

WHUMP!

CAUGHT OFF GUARD. THE BASTARDS. MY POON SHOES WERE SHREDDED...I BEGAN TO SINK...

SO THIS IS IT... THIS IS HOW IT ENDS... I FELT MY LEGS DESCEND INTO THE GOO... THEN MY CHEST... MY NECK...

MY HEAD SLIPPED UNDER...DARKNESS ENGULFED ME...

BUT NOT **COMPLETE** DARKNESS. I OPENED MY EYES...A BROWNISH BLUR SURROUNDED ME... I COULDN'T HOLD MY BREATH ANY LONGER...I FILLED MY LUNGS--

--WITH **AIR!** I COULD BREATHE! IT WAS LIKE SINKING INTO A WARM BATH! SOOTHING, RELAXING...AND BEST OF ALL, NO **RAIN!** A TINY SHAPE SLITHERED PAST MY FACE...

A SKELP'L"ING IN THE MUD! I REACHED OUT MY HAND TO GRAB HIM BUT HE SLITHERED AWAY HAUNTILY STRANGE... SKELPS **LOVE** TO BE EATEN. I ROLLED OVER LAZILY IN THE THICK GOO...MORE SKELPS SURROUNDED ME...

THEY WERE EVERYWHERE! THOUSANDS OF THEM! MILLIONS! ALL STARING AT ME AS I SANK... **STARING**...AND THEN SUDDENLY, CERTAINLY, I KNEW...SECONDS BEFORE IT HAPPENED, I KNEW... I UNDERSTOOD THE MEANING OF THE PHRASE "THE FEW MUST DIE SO THE MANY MAY SURVIVE"... I UNDERSTOOD AND I SCREAMED AS THE SKELPS ATTACKED...

...THE WAR **WAS** OVER... LONG AGO, PROBABLY... THE ENEMY, THE **REAL** ENEMY, HAD WON...

...AND SOMEWHERE, DISTANTLY, BEYOND THE HIDEOUS SOUNDS OF TEARING FLESH AND MY WILD SHRIEKS ..I THOUGHT I HEARD JIMMY JOE LAUGHING...

WASTELAND

FIRST THEY HAD FOUND HIM, STRETCHED OUT THERE UNDER THE BROILING SUN, STILL AS DEATH. THEN THEY HAD DUMPED WHAT WAS LEFT OF HIM IN AN AIR FORCE HELICOPTER (*FORTUNATELY STATIONED NEARBY*) AND AIR LIFTED HIM HERE TO FLAGSTAFF MEMORIAL. THEN THEY HAD STRETCHED HIM OUT AGAIN, PLUNGED NEEDLES INTO HIS VEINS, PUMPED HIM FULL OF ANTI-TOXIN, RUN TESTS, PLUNGED MORE NEEDLES, RUN MORE TESTS, PULLED HIM IN AND OUT OF COMA, RUN YET ***MORE*** TESTS, AND THEN ... THEY HAD PROPPED HIM UP IN BED AND SUBJECTED HIM TO THE WORST TORTURE OF ALL...

ARGGGHH! I CAN'T ***STAND*** ANYMORE!

FLAGSTAFF MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

HAVING TROUBLE, MR. STYLES?

I CAN'T TAKE IT, I TELL YOU! THE SHOW'S WORSE THAN THE COMMERCIALS! GET RID OF IT!

THAT'S "ONE LIFE-- ONE LOVE," MR. STYLES. ALL THE PATIENTS LOVE IT. IT'S A C-WING FAVORITE...

IT SUCKS. WHEN DO I GET OUTTA HERE, NURSE BREAST?

THE NAME IS **BRAST**, MR. STYLES, AS I'VE TOLD YOU MANY TIMES, AND YOU'LL BE RELEASED AS SOON AS DR. WILLIS IS SURE YOU'RE FREE OF DELIRIUM. HAVE YOU HAD YOUR **BM** YET THIS MORNING?

WHY, ISN'T THERE ENOUGH CRAP ON THE T.V. SET? WHO **WRITES** THOSE BLOODY SHOWS?

I'LL CHANGE THE CHANNEL FOR YOU...

AGHH! LIZARDS! REPTILES! GET RID OF IT! I HATE LIZARDS! I HATE 'EM!

GOODNESS! SUCH HISTRIONICS! QUIET DOWN, YOU'LL WAKE THE OTHER PATIENTS!

YOU KNOW **WHY** I HATE LIZARDS, NURSE BREAST?

PROABLY BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT GOT YOU IN HERE. A GILA MONSTER WASN'T IT?

...THE GRANDADDY OF **ALL** GILA MONSTERS!

I'D BEEN WORKIN' MESQUAL MESA. SEE, JUST SOUTH OF OPOSSUM BEND, I COULD **SMELL** THE GOLD UNDER MY BOOT HEELS. THIS TIME I'D **FOUND** IT!

I REACHED BACK, SEE... NOT LOOKIN', GRABBIN' AT MY PICK AND SHOVEL--

"-- AND THE NEXT THING I KNOW..."

'YAGGH! JUMPIN' JESUS!

"HELL I DON'T REMEMBER GOIN' OVER THE EDGE ... ALL I COULD SEE WAS THAT LIZARD'S RED EYES STARIN' INTO MINE..."

"... THAT AND THE SIGHT OF PART OF MY BRAINS OOZIN' OVER THE ROCKS AT THE BOTTOM OF THAT CANYON..."

FORTUNATELY FOR YOU, THE ARMY WAS ON MANEUVERS AND DR. WILLIS IS AN EXPERT AT INSERTING STEEL SKULL PLATES. LUNCH IS IN FIVE MINUTES, MR. STYLES.

HOW 'BOUT SOME ***MEAT*** THIS TIME, HUH?

HEY! HEY, CAN ANYBODY HEAR ME? IS ANYBODY OUT THERE?

LORD, NOW WHAT?

VANCE? JACKSON? CAN YOU HEAR ME? I-I GOT CUT AWAY SOMEHOW FROM THE PARTY? LISTEN --I-I THINK ONE OF THEM IS ***AFTER*** ME!

ONE OF WHOM, THE SPONSORS? MAYBE THEY WANNA TALK TO YOU ABOUT YOUR ACTING!

DINNER IS SERVED... NICE HOT GRUEL!

OH, CHRIST, NOT ***THAT*** STUFF AGAIN! I'D RATHER EAT PICKLED ***RAT MEAT*** THAN ***THAT*** STUFF! WHEN DO I GET SOMETHING I CAN SINK MY ***TEETH*** INTO?

AS SOON AS DR. WILLIS SAYS YOU'RE READY FOR SOLIDS. HOW'S YOUR T.V. SHOW?

IT'S TURNED INTO A JUNGLE TRAVELOGUE. HOW MUCH WOULD IT COST ME TO HAVE YOU SNEAK IN A BIG MAC, MISS BREAST?

HE'S HUNTING ME DOWN, I TELL YOU! HE'S TRYING TO KILL ME!

SO KILL HIM FIRST, STUPID, (SLURP!) YOU'RE THE ONE WITH THE GUN!

VANCE? JACKSON? IS THAT YOU? IT-- SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE EATING-- W-WHERE ARE YOU?

FLAGSTAFF MEMORIAL HOSPITAL DR. SCHWEITZER, WHERE ARE YOU?

F-FLAGSTAFF MEMORIAL? WHERE THE DEVIL IS ***THAT***? YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE IN QUADRANT SEVEN!

HUH? HEY, WHAT ***IS*** THIS? CAN YOU ***HEAR*** ME?

YES, I CAN HEAR YOU! VANCE? THAT ***YOU***?

WHAT IS THIS, A ***RIB***? IS THIS CLOSED-CIRCUIT T.V. OR SOMETHING?

YOU DON'T SOUND LIKE ONE OF THE PARTY. WHO THE DEVIL ***ARE*** YOU?

LOOK PAL, HOW 'BOUT ***I*** ASK THE QUESTIONS AN' ***YOU*** ANSWER, HUH?

I'M RICHARD LINKS, BIOCHEMICAL ENGINEER. ONE OF A FIVE-MEMBER PARTY SENT HERE TO THE JURASSIC AGE TO--

WE STARTED IN 2083, OF COURSE, BUT OUR EXPEDITION WAS TO STUDY PLANT LIFE IN--

JURASSIC AGE!!

2083!

IF YOU'RE NOT IN OUR PARTY, THEN HOW CAN THIS TRANSMISSION BE REACHING YOU? WHAT TIME FRAME ARE YOU IN?

1983, LAST TIME I CHECKED!

1983... MY GOD... AND YOU CAN ***SEE*** ME?

CLEAR AS A BELL. WHO'S HOLDING THE CAMERA, LINKS?

MY ROBO-FLOAT IT FOLLOWS ME EVERYWHERE, LIKE A MAGNET. WE GOT SEPARATED FROM THE MAIN PARTY, THOUGH, AND I... I'M AFRAID I'M BEING TRACKED!

YOU MENTIONED THAT. BY WHOM, BY WHAT?

WE SEEM TO HAVE STUMBLED ONTO A TRIBE OF WHAT MAY BE VERY EARLY MAN-- PERHAPS EVEN THE EARLIEST, PREDATING AUSTRALOPITHECUS.

TIME FOR YOUR BOOSTER, M.R. STYLES!

NURSE BREAST: 'C'MERE! LOOK AT THIS! LOOK AT THE T.V.! LISTEN TO THIS GUY!

CARRION

"... AND YOUR DOG WILL WOOLF DOWN NEW "CARRION" DOG FOOD THE WAY YOU WOULD WOOLF DOWN A SLAB OF RARE, RED ROAST."

I DON'T HAVE A DOG, MR STYLES... NOW WHICH CHEEK WOULD YOU PREFER?

DOG? WHAT'RE YOU--

I THOUGHT YOU HATED THAT SHOW, MR. STYLES...

HEY, WAIT A MINUTE, THERE'S A GUY IN TROUBLE AND--OWW!

IT'S NOT A SHOW! LOOK! SEE THE GUY IN THE JUNGLE, HE'S--

MR. STYLES, THAT'S A 1983 MUSTANG CONVERTIBLE I CAN'T AFFORD ONE ON WHAT A NURSE MAKES. WOULD YOU LIKE ANYTHING ELSE BEFORE I GO?

... IT'S THE POISON... I-IM STILL HALLUCINATING...

STYLES? YOU STILL THERE? YOU'VE GOT TO HELP ME!

I'M SICK... I'M A SICK MAN...

I CAN'T SEE YOU, STYLES, YOU DON'T HAVE A CAMERA--- I CAN ONLY ***HEAR*** YOU, SO SPEAK LOUDER PLEASE. I'M IN TROUBLE!

YOU DON'T EXIST! GO AWAY!

--SOMEHOW MY TRANSMISSIONS HAVE GOTTEN SCRAMBLED, BYPASSING MY PARTY HERE IN THE JURASSIC AND LOCKING INTO YOUR RECEIVER THERE IN 1983!

NOBODY CAN... SEE YOU... BUT... ME... Z-Z-Z...

STYLES? DON'T FALL ASLEEP! ***STYLES*** I NEED YOUR HELP! ***STYLES!***

HAVE A NICE SLEEP, MR. STYLES? TIME FOR SUPPER AND VITAMINS! I HAVE SOME LOVELY ONION SOUP!

--"PICKLED RAT MEAT", I KNOW; BUT DOCTOR'S ORDERS. SHALL I SWITCH ON THE TV? "ONE LIFE TO LEAVE" IS JUST STARTING!

STYLES! STYLES, ARE YOU THERE?

OH, GOD, NOT AGAIN.

WHA-HUH-- OH LORD (GAG) NOT SOUP AGAIN! I'D RATHER EAT--

OH GOODY

YOU'RE BACK! THANK GOD! WHY'D YOU TURN OFF YOUR SET?

YOU'RE NOT *REAL!*

I *AM* REAL! SOMETHING IN THE ROOM WITH YOU MUST BE ACTING AS A SPECIAL CONDUCTOR FOR TRANSMISSION. SOMETHING ON YOU THAT ALLOWS YOU TO SEE WHAT OTHERS CAN'T!

THE PLATE IN MY HEAD...

THE CREATURE IS *CLOSER*, STYLES. IT HAS AN AXE! IT MEANS TO *KILL* ME, I CAN *FEEL* IT!

SO USE THE *GUN!*

YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND! IF I *KILL* THE CREATURE, OR EVEN *INJURE* IT, I COULD UPSET THE ENTIRE BALANCE OF *TIME* FOR CENTURIES TO COME! THIS CREATURE COULD BE THE ORIGINAL ANCESTOR OF MAN! I COULD BE DESTROYING *MYSELF* -- ALL OF US!

THAT'S ABSURD! EARTH IS AN EVOLUTIONARY PLANET WE WOULD STILL EVOLVE SOMEHOW!

YES, BUT AS WHAT? IF I WIPE OUT MAN NOW, WHAT'S TO PREVENT SOME *OTHER* LIFE FORM FROM EVOLVING ... A LOWER LIFE FORM, PERHAPS!

H-HOW CAN I HELP? I'M HERE ...YOU'RE *THERE!*

GET THEM TO OPERATE STYLES, ON YOUR HEAD! PERHAPS THEY CAN FIND A WAY TO BEND THE TRANSMISSION BACK TO--

YAGGH!

LINKS!

STYLES! (CHOKE!)

NOT THE GUN, LINKS-- DON'T USE THE GUN!

LINKS!

BLAM!

ENOUGH TV, MR STYLES--TIME FOR LUNCH. AND I HAVE A BIG SURPRISE TODAY!

-- SOME NICE PLUMP PICKLED RATS!

WELL AT LAST! SOMETHING I CAN SINK MY FANGS INTO!

PRIDE OF THE FLEET

THE COL/FAX SHE WORE AT HER GIRDLE, AND SHE DIDN'T LIKE IT. IT PULLED THE WRONG WAY. IT HURT. IT LOOKED UGLY. THE STUNNER SHE HAD THROWN AWAY HOURS AGO. SHE COULD CLAIM LATER THAT SHE'D LOST IT IN THE UNDERBRUSH. IT WOULD COST HER, OF COURSE, BUT SHE'D RATHER PAY A FINE THAN BE HUMILIATED BY THE PRESENCE OF A STUNNER

SHE WOULD HAVE THROWN AWAY THE COL FAX, TOO, BUT .T HAPPENED TO BE WORTH SEVERAL MILLION CREDITS BASE VALUE AND MUCH MORE THAN THAT TO THE PRESTIGE OF COLONY SIX AND ITS COMMANDER; F SHE HAD ANY INTENT ON OF STAY.NG WITH THE FLEET SHE HAD TO HANG ONTO THAT PARTICULAR PIECE OF EQUIPMENT

ALL RIGHT, SHE'D PUT UP WITH IT. EVEN IF IT DID GET IN HER WAY, SLOW HER DOWN, AND (MOST IMPORTANTLY) UNFORGIVABLY DISFIGURE HER NEWLY-DESIGNED COMBAT UNIFORM. SHE'D PUT UP W TH IT...

BUT DAMNED IF SHE'D USE IT. SHE'D FLIT THROUGH THIS MISSION IN RECORD TIME AND BRING BACK HER MAN WITHOUT A SCRATCH--TO EITHER OF THEM. AND SHE DIDN'T NEED ANY NEW TECHNOLOGICAL WONDERS TO ACCOMPLISH IT. DANGERS? THREATS? SURE, THERE WERE ALWAYS THESE...

STORY: BRUCE JONES PENCILS: FRANK BRUNNER INKS: MIKE MIGNOLA
Colors: Joe Chiodo Letters: Carrie McCarthy

BUT SHE'D RUN INTO THEM BEFORE IN MORE JUNGLES ON MORE PLANETS THAN SHE COULD REMEMBER. SHE COULD HANDLE THEM. SHE HAD HER SWORD. HER SWORD. .

SHE TOUCHED IT NOW LIGHTLY ON THE JEWELED HILT AS SHE STEPPED OVER A MOSS-LADEN LOG, AND SHE COULDN'T SUPPRESS THE SMILE OF PRIDE TUGGING AT HER CHEEK. NOW HERE WAS A SWORD!...

HER UNIFORM MAY HAVE BEEN MERELY SHOWY TRUE. THE FLAMING HAIR. MOISTURE-GLOSS LIPS. DIAMOND STUDDED BOOTS--ALL DECORATION, ALL FOR EFFECT. GRANTED. EVEN THE SWEEP AND DESIGN OF THE BLADE ITSELF MAY HAVE BEEN OPULENTLY HISTRIONIC--BUT THAT'S WHERE THE DRAMATICS ENDED..

ONCE THAT EBONY GLOVED HAND WRAPPED AROUND THAT EBONY GRIP AND THE BLADING SABRE-LENGTH SANG FROM ITS SCABBARD. ALL THE TINSEL ENDED. ALL THE GLITTER STOPPED. SHE WAS LIGHTNING. SHE WAS WHIRLWIND. SHE WAS BLUR--EVERYWHERE HER OPPONENT SHOULD HAVE BEEN JUST ONE-TENTH OF A SECOND BEFORE HE GOT THERE...

SHE WAS SLASH AND GLEAM AND TERRIBLE WHINING, WIND-SCREAMING DEATH TILL HER ADVERSARIES GOT DIZZY JUST WATCHING AND PROBABLY NEVER FELT THE INCREDIBLE RAZOR INCISIONS, EVEN AFTER THE GROUND WAS SOAKING RED AROUND THEM AND THEIR KNEES WERE BUCKLING OF THEIR OWN ACCORD. OH, SHE WAS GOOD ...SHE WAS THE ***BEST***...

SHE KNEW IT TOO, AND ENJOYED THE REPUTATION THAT WENT WITH IT. MEN WERE AT ONCE INTENSELY ENAMOURED AND TERRIFIED OF HER. SHE SIMPLY COULD NOT BE BESTED WITH A SWORD--NOT AT COLONY SIX ANYWAY--AND IN A PLACE WHERE THE MEN OUTNUMBERED THE WOMEN THREE TO ONE, WELL, IT MADE LIFE INTERESTING...

THEY WERE ALL IN LOVE WITH HER; ALL OF THE MEN AND MANY OF THE WOMEN. SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL, EXOTIC, TALENTED, ***LETHAL***. IT'S EASY TO LOVE PEOPLE LIKE THAT. EVEN THE COLONY COMMANDER WASN'T IMMUNE; HE WITH HIS STUFFY LITTLE PANELED OFFICE AND STUFFIER LITTLE TUNIC...

COME IN, SHEFFIELD, YES..

THANK YOU, SIR

SIT DOWN, PLEASE.

MY GOD. IS THAT HER UNIFORM? IS SHE RUNNING AROUND THE HALLS LIKE THAT?

I PREFER TO STAND, THANK YOU, SIR

IT SHOWS ME OFF BETTER.

AS YOU WISH...NOW, AHEM. AS YOU'VE NO DOUBT HEARD, WE'VE GOT AN AWOL AS OF LAST NIGHT, SHEFFIELD. A PRIVATE...UH...PAPER'S HERE SOMEWHERE...

LEAKWOOD, SIR.

LEAKWOOD. YES. PRIVATE LEAKWOOD. AWOL AT 0728 HOURS...

OUR FIRST AWOL IN SEVEN YEARS, SHEFFIELD, MY FIRST EVER. I DON'T LIKE IT. NOT A BIT. I WANT HIM BACK. I WANT HIM ALIVE. I WANT HIM RECYCLED

YES, SIR.

IT'S A BLEMISH SHEFFIELD. YOU CAN APPRECIATE THAT

YES, SIR

WE DON'T WANT BLEMISHES AT COLONY SIX. NO ONE DOES

WE CAN RECTIFY THIS THING SHEFFIELD; CLEARLY EFFICIENTLY. I KNOW WE CAN. WE HAVE THE TRAINING. THE FACILITY. THE MAN POWER. THE EXPERTISE. WE'RE ONE OF THE BEST SHEFFIELD, ONE OF THE VERY BEST. I WANT US TO REMAIN THAT WAY.

NO SIR.

I DON'T WANT A BLEMISH LIKE THIS TO UPSET EVERYTHING FLEET HAS BUILT US FOR. NO ONE DOES.

THAT...AH UNIFORM YOU'RE WEARING, HAS IT BEEN OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED?

IT HAS, SIR. I DESIGNED IT MYSELF AFTER THE PRINCESS DEJAH THORIS.

WHO?

DEJAH THORIS, A FICTIONAL CHARACTER CREATED BY EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS.

BURROUGHS..

A TWENTIETH CENTURY NOVELIST, SIR. HE'S ALL THE RAGE NOW.

DEAR LORD, WHAT THEY'RE PASSING THESE DAYS! YOU'LL WEAR SOMETHING LESS.. REVEALING ON THE MISSION, OF COURSE.

SIR, I PREFER TO GO AS I AM. THIS WAS DESIGNED AS A COMBAT UNIFORM

BUT THE... YOUR BOSOM, IT'S UNPROTECTED.

BARE BREASTS ARE NOT UNCOMMON ON CYL'S 4 NOW SIR

I'M AWARE OF THAT, BUT SURELY--

SIR, I BELIEVE MY PRESENT UNIFORM WILL AFFORD ME WITH THE GREATEST AMOUNT OF COMFORT AND FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THEREFORE SERVE AS THE BEST POSSIBLE ASSET TO MY ABILITIES AND THE SUBSEQUENT CAPTURE OF THE FUGITIVE...

...BUT THEN, SHE'D REHEARSED IT THIRTY OR FORTY TIMES BEFORE ENTERING HIS OFFICE. EVERY WOMAN AT COLONY SIX WAS JEALOUS OF HER ABILITY TO HANDLE THE COMMANDER. IF THEY ONLY REALIZED HOW SIMPLE IT WAS...HOW UNDER ALL THE BRASS AND BLUFF, HE WAS JUST LIKE ALL MEN...

CLEVER THAT SPEECH...

WHO'S THERE?

BY HIS UNIFORM SHE COULD SEE HE WAS A MEMBER OF FLEET BUT NOT OF COLONY SIX. AND COLONY SIX HAD EXCLUSIVE PRIVILEGES ON THIS PLANET. COULD THIS BE ANOTHER AWOL FROM ANOTHER COLONY? SHE STRODE POLITELY, CONFIDENTLY UP TO HIM AND TOOK IN HIS BEARING WITH A SINGLE SWEEP OF HER CRITICAL EYES...

TALL, HUSKY, YELLOW FLEET STRIPE ON HIS ARM LIKE HERS, BUCCANEER PANTS AND BOOTS (VERY VOGUE THESE DAYS) TANK TOP, SERIES SEVEN SWORD, NO STUNNER, UNNATURALLY CURLY HAIR. THAT LAST ITEM WAS EGOCENTRIC. ANY MAN WHO HAD HIS HAIR SET REGULARLY WAS OBVIOUSLY GLUED ON HIMSELF...

THIS GUY WAS PROBABLY INTO AN ERROL FLYNN THING (ALSO VERY VOGUE THESE DAYS). IT COULD BE ALL SWAGGER BUT THEN SHE WAS FLAMBOYANT TOO AND SHE WAS ***GOOD!*** IT WAS ALWAYS WISE TO BE PRUDENT EVEN IF YOU ***WERE*** THE BEST...

STATION?

COLONY TWELVE...

SHE DIDN'T LIKE THE WAY HE SAID IT; SNOBBISH. SHE DIDN'T LIKE WHAT HIS MOUTH DID WHEN IT FORMED THE WORDS. BUT SHE WAS ON OFFICIAL BUSINESS, IN A HURRY. SHE'D GIVE HIM THE BENEFIT...

I'M SHEFFIELD, COLONY SIX ON FLEET APPREHENSION ORDERS. DO YOU WISH TO ASSIST?

NO.

ARE YOU AWARE THAT THIS PLANET IS RESTRICTED TO COLONY SIX PERSONNEL?

IS THAT A FACT?

IT WAS THE WAY HE SAID IT AGAIN. OH, THIS WAS A REAL SMARTASS ALL RIGHT. THAT CONCEITED LITTLE PATRONIZING SMILE. PROBABLY A SEXIST TO BOOT. SHE KNEW SHE SHOULD GO ABOUT HER BUSINESS, LEAVE THIS JERK TO HIMSELF, BUT SHE HELP ADDING ONE LAST ITEM...

WHAT'S YOUR BUSINESS HERE?

I CAME TO BAG A RHUNK.

WITH MY SWORD

WITH HIS SWORD. CUTE THE WAY HE ADDED THAT AT THE END TO LET HER KNOW HE DIDN'T NEED A STUNNER TO KILL A RHUNK. OHH, A REAL SMARTASS ALL RIGHT.

THAT'S AGAINST FLEET LAW.

AND YOU'RE GOING TO REPORT ME, RIGHT?

YES.

KLEVE.

IT WAS WHAT SHE EXPECTED, "KLEVE" WAS ONE OF THE UNIVERSAL WORDS FOR "ON GUARD" FOLLOWED BY THE SWIFT UNSHEATHING OF THE CHALLENGER'S SWORD. EITHER SHE FOLLOWED SUIT NOW OR FACED RIDICULE...

HIS SWORD, SHE NOTICED, MADE A SOUND LIKE 'SHUUNK!' NO SHARPENERS. HE MIGHT BE FLAMBOYANT BUT HE WASN'T IN HER LEAGUE SHE STEPPED IN IMMEDIATELY, NOT WASTING TIME, WITH A DELIBERATELY SLOWED ENGLISH SHOULDER THRUST, SACRIFICING STYLE NOW TO SEE WHAT HE COULD DO...

HHAN!

HER WORD. ORIENTAL, LIKE HER SWORDSMANSHIP. NEITHER WAS WIDELY KNOWN AND RARELY PRACTICED WHICH IS WHY SHE CHOSE THEM. HER SWORD SANG FROM ITS SCABBARD—SHINGGG!—A PHENOMENON CAUSED BY THE FRICTION OF THE CUTTING EDGE RUNNING PAST TWO MINUTE WHEELED SHARPENERS EMPLOYED WITHIN THE CASE...

HE PARRIED NICELY—ANYONE COULD HAVE—BUT STILL, HIS MOVEMENTS WERE RAPID, SURE, EVEN ADMIRABLE. SHE PIVOTED NEXT, WENT LOW AND TRIED A CYRNIAN VOLUPE TO THE SOLAR PLEXUS...

AGAIN HE BLOCKED WITH EASE, ADDING A QUICK COUNTER SLICE WHEN HE JERKED BACK THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO PUT HER OFF BALANCE. IT DIDN'T, OF COURSE, BUT HE WAS ABOVE AVERAGE, DEFINITELY...

SHE PLAYED WITH HIM FOR A TIME, LETTING HIM GET IN A FEW FALSE SCORES UNTIL SHE KNEW HIS EVERY STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS. AND ALTHOUGH THE LATTER FAR OUTNUMBERED THE FORMER, SHE FOUND HIM A SPLENDID SWORDSMAN WITH THE POTENTIAL TO BE EVEN BETTER... IF HE DIDN'T SPEND ALL HIS TIME IN THE BEAUTY SALON. IT WOULD BE A PITY, SHE DECIDED, TO WASTE SOMEONE WHO COULD BE SO VALUABLE TO FLEET...

SHE STEPPED BACK, CLICKED HER HEELS TOGETHER AND POINTED HER SWORD HAND STIFFLY TO THE GROUND AT HER RIGHT SIDE. IT MEANT EITHER "I YIELD" OR "LET'S RECONSIDER."

YOU'RE A FINE SWORDSMAN. I DON'T WISH YOU HARM. LEAVE THE PLANET NOW AND I SEE NO REASON TO REPORT YOU...

KLEVE!

THE VAIN SMILE. HE THOUGHT SHE WAS BLUFFING OUT OF FEAR OH BOY, THERE WAS JUST NO HELP FOR THIS KID. ALL RIGHT THEN, SHE'D TRIED. THE FUN WAS OVER. SHE HAD TO GET BACK TO WORK...

SHE SLOWLY, EVER SO CALMLY DREW THE SWORD LEVEL TO AND HORIZONTAL WITH HER BREASTS. IT WAS A MANEUVER SHE SAVORED. THEY WERE SPLENDID BREASTS; LARGE AND ROUND AND PINK-NIPPLE FIRM. FEW MEN COULD WATCH THEM AND THE SWORD SIMULTANEOUSLY. HE WAS NO EXCEPTION...

HHAN.

NOW IT WAS HER TURN TO SMILE...

HER NEXT MOVE WAS SO LIGHTNING FAST, HE HAD ONLY TIME TO FEEL THE BREEZE HER JOHN CARTER BLADE MADE IN PASSING IN FRONT OF HIM...

HE STARTED TO COUNTER BUT SHE WAS FROZEN NOW AT THE COMPLETION OF HER THRUST, STARING FIXEDLY AT HIS CHEST. BUT SHE HAD MISSED. HE GLANCED DOWN AT HIMSELF. HE'D FELT NOTHING.

BEFORE HE COULD SHUT IT AGAIN SHE WAS BEHIND HIM, SENDING THE SLASHED TANK TOP SWISHING FROM HIS BODY AND OVER HIS HEAD WITH TWO PRECISELY PLACED THRUSTS. TOGETHER THEY WATCHED THE MATERIAL ARC HIGH INTO THE AIR AND DRAPE QUIETLY OVER A LEAFY BRANCH...

THEN THE RIBBONS OF CRIMSON APPEARED MAGICALLY ACROSS HIS TANK TOP, DELAYED SECONDS BY THE IMPOSSIBLE KEENESS OF HER BLADE HIS MOUTH FELL OPEN ..

WHEN HE WHIRLED IN HUMILIATED FURY AT HER, SHE WAS GONE, PIROUETTING GRACEFULLY TO HIS RIGHT...

...NO, TO HIS LEFT...

...NO, NO, SHE WAS BEHIND HIM AGAIN!-- PULLING TENTATIVELY AT HIS WIDE SWASHBUCKLER'S BELT WITH SWORD POINT, THEN EFFORTLESSLY SLICING THROUGH LIKE BUTTER TO THE ANKLES...

THE PANTS FELL AWAY LIKE FAZED PETALS.

THEN SHE FEIGNED TO THE RIGHT--HE FOLLOWED--AND THE PANTS ABOUT HIS ANKLES BROUGHT HIM DOWN WITH A CRASH AS SHE'D PLANNED HE HAD TO LET GO HIS SWORD TO PREVENT IMPALING HIMSELF...

SHE KICKED THE SWORD AWAY AND STUCK HER OWN BLADE BENEATH HIS TERRIFIED CHIN. HIS ADAM'S APPLE MOVED CONVULSIVELY AND HE WAS SUDDENLY SWIMMING IN PERSPIRATION...

UP.

HE OBEYED IMMEDIATELY, PROPELLED AIRLESSLY BY THE SINGING TIP OF THE MAGIC SWORD..

SHE STOOD GRINNING GRIMLY AT HIS NAKEDNESS, LETTING THE RAZOR POINT TRACE A TICKLY, NOT-QUITE-SKIN-PIERCING LINE DOWN HIS THROAT, CHEST BELLY...

SHE LOWERED THE SWORD BETWEEN HIS LEGS AND COCKED HER HEAD SPECULATIVELY. SHE HAD CASTRATED ONLY ONE MAN BEFORE IN SWORDPLAY, ALTHOUGH IT WAS QUITE COMMONLY THE LOSER'S LOT AMONG FLEET SWORDSMEN; INDEED, MANY HALF EXPECTED IT...

BUT SHE FOUND LITTLE SATISFACTION IN NEEDLESSLY MAIMING SOMEONE OR IN THE RAPIDLY GROWING FAD OF "GATHERING NUTS." IN HER BOOK, YOU EITHER KILLED YOUR OPPONENT OUTRIGHT OR YOU LET HIM GO THE WAY HE CAME...

SHE LOOKED UP AT HIS DRIPPING FACE: HE CAUGHT HER GLANCE AND SQUEEZED HIS EYES SHUT, CLENCHING HIS TEETH...

TURN AROUND, PIG WHILE I DECIDE HOW TO KILL YOU...

HE TURNED DRUNKENLY, LEGS CALCIFIED WITH FEAR, AND STOOD TREMBLING BEFORE THE SUN. HE WAS STANDING THERE STILL, AN HOUR LATER, LONG AFTER SHE HAD FADED SILENTLY AS A PANTHER INTO THE TANGLED JUNGLE...

ALONE IN THE FOREST AGAIN, SHE WAS STILL ON LEAKWOOD'S TRAIL AND STILL REMEMBERING WHAT THE COMMANDER SAID ABOUT HIM...

NOW THEN, SHEFFIELD, MY REPORTS SAY YOU KNEW THIS...AH...

LEAKWOOD, SIR.

...KNEW HIM PERSONALLY, IS THAT TRUE?

IT'S UNOFFICIALLY TRUE, YES SIR "ACQUAINTED" IS, PERHAPS, A BETTER WORD. WE RAN INTO EACH OTHER AT THE LIBRARY OCCASIONALLY AND HAD LUNCH TOGETHER ONCE OR TWICE.

ONCE OR TWICE.

TWICE.

WHAT KIND OF LUNCHES, SHEFFIELD?

JUST.. LUNCH, AT THE CAFETERIA.

I SEE WHAT ELSE?

LET'S SEE...I BELIEVE HE TOOK ME TO THE MOVIES ONCE, YES, SEVERAL MONTHS AGO.

AFTER THE FILM?

HE TOOK ME HOME--NO! I TOOK HIM HOME. HE'S...SMALL, SIR AND WELL I'M GOOD WITH A SWORD, SO... THE TRUTH IS, SIR, WE WERE JUST FRIENDS. THERE WAS NEVER ANYTHING ROMANTIC ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP. I DON'T THINK LEAKWOOD HAD ROMANTIC INCLINATIONS TOWARDS ANYONE. HE JUST WASN'T THE TYPE...

I SOCIALIZED WITH HIM BECAUSE I ENJOYED HIS COMPANY. I COULD RELAX AROUND HIM; HE LIKED ME FOR MY MIND. IT WAS NICE TO KNOW YOU WERE GOING TO SPEND A QUIET EVENING WITHOUT GETTING PHYSICAL ONCE IN AWHILE. LEAKWOOD DIDN'T HAVE MANY FRIENDS. HE'S SORT OF...FUNNY LOOKING, TO BE BLUNT. I FELT A LITTLE SORRY FOR HIM AND I KNEW HE LIKED MY PAYING ATTENTION TO HIM, ESPECIALLY AROUND THE COLONY SWORDSMEN.

WAS HE A THIEF, SHEFFIELD? DID HE EVER STEAL ANYTHING TO YOUR KNOWLEDGE?

NOT THAT I'M AWARE OF, S.R.

WELL HE HAS NOW. SOMETHING EXTREMELY VALUABLE, EXTREMELY EXPENSIVE AND EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO COLONY SIX...I WANT IT BACK, SHEFFIELD..

UH... JUST WHAT WAS IT THAT LEAKWOOD STOLE? I WANT TO KNOW WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR.

I'M SORRY, SHEFFIELD, I CAN'T PROVIDE YOU WITH THAT INFORMATION.

...C-CAN'T PROVIDE..

IT'S TOP SECRET, SHEFFIELD. EVERYTHING IN THIS COLONY IS TOP SECRET. THE OBJECT THIS MAN STOLE IS HIGHLY CONFIDENTIAL. I UNDERSTAND THERE ARE NO MORE THAT TWO OF THEM IN EXISTANCE AND BOTH OF THEM ARE HERE AT COLONY SIX--OR WERE HERE. I WANT IT BACK!

BUT SIR, IF I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT IT IS...HOW WILL I... I CAN I...

I WANT IT BACK, SHEFFIELD! THAT'S AN ORDER!!

SHE PAUSED FOR A MOMENT IN THE LEAFY GLEN AND ADJUSTED THE COL.FAX DANGLING AT HER HIP. IT PULLED THE WRONG WAY AS SHE WALKED AND IT WAS BEGINNING TO LEAVE BRUISES. SHE DETESTED IT; IT WAS HIDEOUSLY UGLY AND DETRACTED FROM THE LINES OF HER UNIFORM.

BUT THE COMMANDER HAD INSISTED THAT SHE TAKE IT. IT WAS. ACCORDING TO HIM HER ONLY PRACTICAL DEFENSE AGAINST A RAMPAGING RHUNK. NO OTHER WEAPON HAD PROVEN TO BE THE LEAST BIT EFFECTIVE AGAINST WHAT WAS RUMOURED TO BE AN ALL BUT INDESTRUCTIBLE CREATURE. CERTAINLY HER SWORD WOULD BE OF NO HELP --ACCORDING TO THE COMMANDER ANYWAY. BUT, OF COURSE, HER EGO WOULDN'T LET HER BELIEVE THIS. SHE DIDN'T BELIEVE THE CREATURE EXISTED THAT COULDN'T BE BROUGHT DOWN WITH A WELL-PLACED THRUST OF HER MARVELOUS SWORD--INCLUDING A FEW COLONY MALES WHO HAD BEEN FOOLISH ENOUGH TO COME UP AGAINST HER.

BUT TO HUMOR THE COMMANDER SHE'D TAKEN IT. IT WAS EITHER THAT OR GIVE UP THE ASSIGNMENT, AND SHE WOULDN'T HAVE PASSED THIS ONE UP FOR ANYTHING. THE PRESTIGE ALONE OF TRACKING A MAN IN AN UNCHARTED JUNGLE WAS WORTH IT, TO SAY NOTHING OF THE PROMOTION AND RAISE IN PAY SHE'D UNDOUBTEDLY EARN. IF LEAKWOOD WAS OUT THERE SHED NAIL HIM...

THE DANGLEFLIES WERE OUT ZEROING IN ON HER LIKE AN ATTACKING AIR-FORCE, ROLLING THEIR CRYSTAL WINGS DELIRIOUSLY IN HER SWEAT GLANDS...

SHE FOUND A MILKNAW BUSH WITHOUT EFFORT, BROKE ONE OF ITS BERRIES BETWEEN HER FINGERS, AND SPREAD THE GLISTENING OIL OVER HER LIMBS. THE DANGLEFLIES BUZZED OFF RESENTFULLY...

THE GROUND BENEATH HER BOOTS GREW STEADILY SOFTER, DAMPER, AS IT ALWAYS DID TOWARD EVENING. THE RHUNKS WOULD BE PUSHING UP ANY TIME NOW. SHE FINGERED THE HILT OF HER SWORD NERVOUSLY...

A STRANGE SPECIES OF LIZARD-BIRD SCREECHED ABRUPTLY ABOVE HER HEAD. SHE TWISTED AROUND AND CAUGHT SIGHT OF ITS YELLOW-BLUE FEATHERS SPIRALING SWIFTLY ACROSS THE MAUVE SKY, ARROWING GRACEFULLY TO A NEARBY TREE...

...LANDING NOT SO GRACEFULLY WITH A LIGHT PLOP. AS SHE WATCHED, IT BEGAN KICKING CONVULSIVELY. IT HAD CHOSEN THE WRONG TREE. IN A MOMENT IT STIFFENED AND FADED RAPIDLY INTO THE TRUNK AS THE TREE ABSORBED IT HUNGRILY...

SHE KNELT DOWN BESIDE LEAKWOOD'S LATEST BOOTPRINT AND TOOK A READING WITH THE POCKET TRACKOMETER SNAPPED TO HER GIRDLE. TO HER AMAZEMENT THE LITTLE RED NEEDLE HOVERED JUST OVER THE SEVEN-MINUTE MARK.

LEAKWOOD MUST BE VERY CLOSE. ACCORDING TO HER RATE OF PURSUIT, HE MUST HAVE SLOWED CONSIDERABLY WITHIN THE LAST HOUR. ODD. HE COULDN'T HAVE TIRED THIS EARLY. WAS IT AN AMBUSH? OR HAD HE FINALLY COME TO HIS SENSES?

SHE PRODUCED A FOOD TAB FROM HER BELT AND CHEWED IT REFLECTIVELY. LEAKWOOD WAS A HARD ONE TO FIGURE ALL RIGHT; CAUTIOUS, INTROVERTIVE, RARELY TALKING AT ALL DURING THE FEW TIMES SHE'D BEEN W TH HIM. STILL, SHE COULDN'T BELIEVE HE'D DO HER ANY HARM. HE MAY NOT HAVE SHARED THE OTHER MEN'S PASSION FOR HER BUT SHE'D ALWAYS SEEN AFFECTION IN HIS EYES...

HE ***WAS*** AN ODD ONE, THOUGH...

SHE TWITCHED SPASMODICALLY AS A PUNGENT ODOR ASSAILED HER NOSTRILS. HER NOSE WRINKLED IN REVULSION. SHE CAST ABOUT FOR THE SOURCE, RIGHT HAND GR.PPING THE DARK HILT OF HER BLADE...

BEH ND HER A SOFT PLOPPING NOISE BECAME EVIDENT. SHE WH RLED IN TIME TO SEE THE BROWN SH SNOUT OF A FEMALE RHUNK POKING THROUGH THE SURFACE SOIL AMID CLUMPS OF ITS OWN EXCREMENT...

SHE STEPPED BACK GINGERLY, EYES RIVETED ON THE ENORMOUS BLOCK-LIKE HEAD TW TCH NG EARS AND BLINKING YELLOW PUP LS THE SMELL BECAME OVERPOWERING NOW. IT HADN'T SEEN HER YET SO SHE MERELY MERGED WITH THE SURROUNDING UNDERGROWTH...

SHE WATCHED N REPUGNANT FASCINATION AS T HEAVED ITS TITAN C BULK OUT OF THE WET EARTH AND YAWNED ENORMOUSLY. IT WAS EVERYTH NG THE MANUAL AND THE COMMANDER HAD DESCRIBED...

NOW. I'M SURE YOU RE FAM L AR W TH THE W LDL FE ON TH S PLANET FROM YOUR MANUAL SHEFFIELD. LET ME EMPHAS ZE THAT THESE THREE HUNDRED AND S XTY-E GHT PAGES BEFORE YOU DO NOT EXAGGERATE IN DESCR B NG THE FERO-C TY OF THESE CREATURES..

THEY ARE MANY AND VARIED AND NEARLY ALL LETHAL I REALIZE THAT SWORDPLAY IS VERY MUCH THE FASHION THESE DAYS--THAT SOME OF YOU YOUNG PEOPLE ARE QUITE PROFICIENT WITH A BLADE HOWEVER I'M GOING TO INSIST YOU TAKE A STUNNER. .

BUT SIR--

PLEASE I'M WELL AWARE OF YOUR PROWESS AND REPUTATION, SHEFFIELD, AND THAT THE BLADE HAS RECENTLY BEEN RECOGNIZED AS AN OFFICIAL FLEET WEAPON. BUT THIS PLANET IS DIFFERENT. ASIDE FROM THIS AWOL ONLY SEVEN MEN HAVE EVER BEEN OUTSIDE THESE WALLS WE LOST TWO OF THEM BECAUSE WE WEREN'T PREPARED. I DON'T INTEND TO LET THAT HAPPEN AGAIN.

YES SIR

TAKE A LOOK AT THIS, SHEFFIELD TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE.

A RHUNK, SIR

UGLY BASTARD ISN'T HE?

EXTREMELY SIR.

UGLY AND HUGE AND DEADLY. YOU'VE HEARD STORIES OF HOW THEY CAN TEAR ANIMALS TWICE THEIR SIZE TO SHREDS WITH THOSE CLAWS WHILE HOLDING THEM SECURELY WITH THOSE GHASTLY TENACIOUS TENTACLES...

YOU'VE HEARD AND READ HOW THEIR HIDE IS COMPARABLE TO THE FINEST CHROME ARMOR HOW IN FACT A CERTAIN PERCENT OF THEIR CHEMICAL MAKE-UP IS ALLOY

WE GOT THIS RARE FOOTAGE OF A NEIGHBORING SYSTEM TRYING TO DESTROY A BABY RHUNK WITH UTHANIAN BLITZER BOMBS. WATCH...

WHUMP

THEY CAN'T BE KILLED, SHEFFIELD. WE'VE TRIED. WE'VE LOST MEN TRYING. SPENT MILLIONS. IT'S NOT WITHIN OUR PRESENT TECHNICAL SCOPE. THEY SIMPLY CAN'T BE STOPPED!

BUT THEY CAN BE FOOLED!

FOOLED, SIR?

HOAXED. CONNED. THERE'S ONLY ONE ANIMAL ON THIS PLANET A FULL GROWN RHUNK WON'T ATTACK AND IMMEDIATELY DISEMBOWEL. DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT ANIMAL IS, SHEFFIELD?

ANOTHER RHUNK SIR?

THAT'S VERY GOOD, SHEFFIELD. VERY ASTUTE. YES. ANOTHER RHUNK. AND WE CAN MAKE ANOTHER RHUNK... WE HAVE MADE ANOTHER RHUNK IN OUR LABS HERE IN THE COLONY WITH THIS INSTRUMENT IN MY HANDS

A COLIFAX

A COLIFAX. IT HUNG FROM THE GOLD CHAIN ON HER WAIST, THE COLD METAL PRESSING UNCOMFORTABLY AGAINST HER BARE TUMMY BANGING AGAINST IT WHEN SHE WALKED. UNTIL THIS MOMENT IT HAD BEEN A HEAVY UNWANTED BURDEN THAT SHE'D HAVE GIVEN A WEEK'S PAY TO BE RID OF, TOP SECRET OR NOT...

NOW SHE WASN'T SO SURE

IF IT COULD SOMEHOW PROTECT HER FROM THIS INCREDIBLE CREATURE BEFORE HER...FOR IT WAS OBVIOUS NOW THAT NOTHING ELSE COULD. THE COMMANDER HAD BEEN RIGHT. SHE'D BEEN A FOOL TO THINK SHE COULD INFLICT THE SLIGHTEST DAMAGE ON ONE OF THESE MONSTROSITIES WITH HER FLIMSY SWORD. THE EMERGING RHUNK WAS AN AWE-INSPIRING STUDY IN ARMOR-PLATED DESTRUCTION..

NOTHING SHORT OF A T-934 MISSLE COULD BRING IT DOWN, OF THAT SHE WAS SURE. THE SWORD IN HER HAND FELT, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HER LIFE, TOTALLY INEFFECTUAL. THAT GUY SHE'D DEPANTED FROM COLONY TWELVE MUST HAVE BEEN AN IDIOT · OR...

LIKE HER, HE'D NEVER SEEN A REAL RHUNK IN THE FLESH BEFORE...

SHE STUMBLED BACK THROUGH THE CREEPERS AS IT LIFTED ITS HEAD AND GAZED ABOUT. PERHAPS IF SHE WERE VERY, VERY QUIET .

ABRUPTLY THE GROUND DISAPPEARED ...SHE WAS TREADING EMPTY AIR...

HEY!

CRUNCH!

THUMP!

...GROAN...

(GULP!)

..CHRIST!...

T-THAT'S A G-GOOD BOY.. JUST S-STAY WHERE YOU ARE A F-FEW SECONDS LONGER ..

OH GOD. IT'S BROKEN! I'VE BROKEN IT IT WON'T WORK..!

IT WAS A BIG RHUNK, A MALE. IT'S NOSE WAS IN THE AIR NOW TAKING IN THE FULL SCENT OF HER WITH THE AID OF THE STRONG EVENING BREEZE. THE THIN, VEINED MEMBRANES OF ITS FOUR NOSTRILS FLARED RED SIMULTANEOUSLY AND SHE THOUGHT SHE DETECTED A SUDDEN TREMOR PASS ALONG THE RIDGES OF ITS BACK .

METHODICALLY, AS IF CONFIDENT OF THE HELPLESSNESS OF ITS PREY, IT ADVANCED ON HER, MUSCLES RIDING IN SENSUOUS RHYTHM ALONG ITS SHOULDERS, TENTACLES TWITCHING IN ANTICIPATION. SHEFFIELD FELT HER BLOOD TURN TO ICE...

OH GOD, WORK! PLEASE WORK!!
REMEMBER. THE COLIFAX IS HIGHLY SOPHISTICATED, POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS PIECE OF EQUIPMENT. IN ORDER TO OPERATE IT, YOU MUST FIRST DISENGAGE THIS GREEN SAFETY LEVER...
THE SAFETY LEVER! OF COURSE!
HUUUMMMMMMMMMMMMM
THE HOTNESS FLOODING HER BODY WAS NOT ALTOGETHER UNPLEASANT. SHE HAD THE DISTINCT FEELING SHE WAS BEING PULLED SLOWLY APART FROM ALL SIDES LIKE HEATED TAFFY. SHE REFUSED TO PANIC THOUGH; SHE KNEW AS COLONY COMMAND HAD TOLD HER, THE PROCESS WOULD REVERSE ITSELF THE MOMENT SHE STEPPED ON THE YELLOW BUTTON...
EVEN NOW THE FEAR WAS SUBSIDING AS SHE TOOK ON THE PROPORTIONS AND CHARACTER OF HER NEW BODY...AND THE APPROACHING RHUNK WAS APPEARING MUCH LESS MENACING WITH THE ADVENT OF HER NEW HEIGHT AND GIRTH...

TS NOSTRILS DIDN T FLARE ANY LESS HOWEVER, AND THE TREMORS ALONG ITS BACK INCREASED, IF ANYTHING. IT WAS STILL INTENSELY NTERESTED IN HER FOR SOME REASON...

EVEN BEFORE IT MOVED OVER AND DELIBERATELY CRUSHED FLAT HER COLIFAX WITH ITS MASSIVE HOOF, SEALING HER FATE FOREVER, SHE KNEW ..

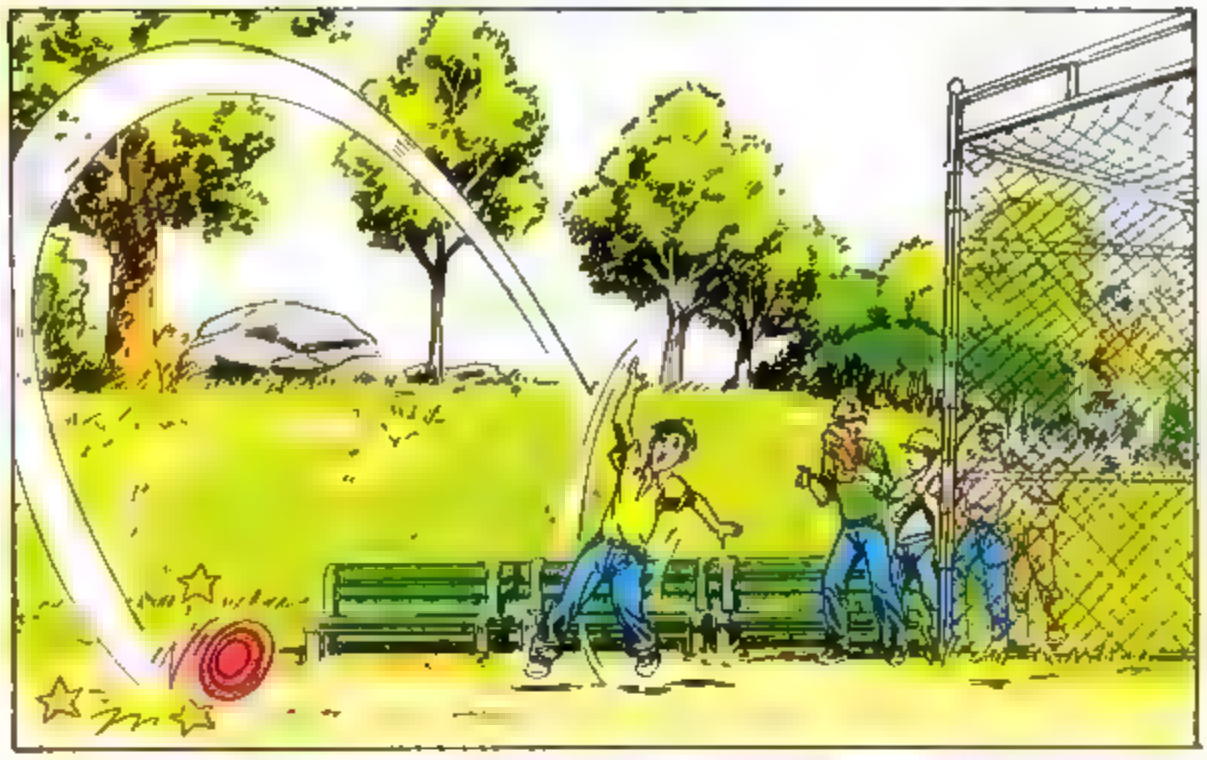
...EVEN BEFORE IT WRAPPED ITS TEN TENTACLES ABOUT HER ARDENTLY AND ADJUSTED HER TO A MOUNTING POSITION, SHE KNEW...

FOR SHE HAD LOOKED CLOSE INTO ITS EYES AND THEY HAD TOLD HER EVERYTHING. PERFECT AS THE COL-FAX WAS IT COULDN'T QUITE DIS-GUISE THE FAMILIAR PERSONALITY BEHIND THOSE EYES, THE QUIET, NTROVERTED BUT HIGHLY IMAGIN-ATIVE BRAN...

AND IN THAT INSTANT SHE KNEW EXACTLY WHY LEAKWOOD HAD LED HER THIS MERRY CHASE AND WHAT THE PIECE OF EQUIPMENT WAS HE'D STOLEN FROM COLONY SIX... IF HE COULDN'T HAVE HER ONE WAY, HE'D HAVE HER ANOTHER...

SHE'D MISS HER FRIENDS, OF COURSE, AND LIFE AT THE COLONY. BUT MOST OF ALL, SHE'D MISS HER SWORD. EVEN WITH THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE TENTACLES AT HER COMMAND, WITH SEVEN THOUSAND POUNDS OF RHUNK BEHIND IT, IT WAS DIFFICULT TO BE AS GRACEFUL AS DEJAH THORIS

Small Change



Holy---

HERE YA GO, KID! THAT WAS *GREAT*! YOU CAN PLAY ON MY TEAM *ANY* DAY!

WHAT'S THE TAKE?

TWO LOUSY BUCKS.

CHEAPSKATES!

Fin

IT ALL FITS!

TERI AND I HELD EACH OTHER CLOSELY THERE IN THE CINDER BLOCK CONFINES OF DR. WHEATLEY'S OFFICE, THE WARMTH OF OUR BODIES FENDING OFF--TEMPORARILY AT LEAST--THE AWFUL COLD PRESSING IN ABOUT US. ALONE AT LAST. IT WAS WHAT WE HAD WANTED FROM THE VERY START. NOW WE HAD IT...NOW THAT HER HUSBAND WAS DEAD AS WE'D PLANNED... NOW THAT THE ENTIRE CREW OF PROJECT ICEBERG WAS DEAD AS WE ***HADN'T*** PLANNED!

NOW THAT THE IRREPRESSIBLE COLD WAS SENDING A SHIVER THROUGH TERI'S LITHE, SUPPLE FORM AND THE BLOCK HOUSE WINDOWS WERE CRYSTALIZING BEFORE MY EYES. I GLANCED DOWN AT DR. WHEATLY'S DIARY ON THE DESK AND GRINNED SARDONIC DEFEAT. I PULLED TERI CLOSER TO ME AND GAZED OUT THE RAPIDLY CLOUDING WINDOW AT OUR SPACE SHIP ON THE HORIZON, ALL WARM AND FUELED AND READY TO GO...IF ONLY WE COULD REACH HER. TERI SHIVERED AGAIN AND WHIMPERED SOFTLY IN MY ARMS... AND I REMEMBERED...

Gray Morrow

...I REMEMBERED THE FIRST TIME I HAD SEEN THE BLOCK HOUSE, THE FIRST TIME OUR SHIP HAD TOUCHED DOWN ON THE FROZEN LITTLE PLANET, THE FIRST TIME PROJECT CEBERG HAD BECOME A REALITY FOR ALL OF US...JUST A SCANT SEVEN DAYS AGO...

STORY: BRUCE JONES ART: GRAY MORROW

WELL, THERE SHE IS, DOCTOR, ***TERRA 4***, OUR HOME FOR THE NEXT THREE MONTHS!

IT LOOKS BEAUTIFUL. WHAT A PARADISE!

ENJOY IT WHILE YOU MAY, MY DEAR...

--I KNOW, IT'LL BE A GLACIAL WASTES INSIDE OF THREE WEEKS; I WAS AT THE BRIEFING TOO, YOU KNOW!

BOY, I'LL BET THAT SLMPTER PARTY WILL BE GLAD TO SEE US! THEY'VE BEEN HERE FOR THREE MONTHS!

WELL, THEY HAVEN'T EXACTLY ARRANGED A TICKER TAPE PARADE FOR US, HAVE THEY?

...CURIOUS.. I THOUGHT THEY'D BE WAITING AT THE LANDING PAD...

HEY, DOC! ANY WILDLIFE ON THIS PLANET? I'M HUNGRY!

NOT THAT ANYONE'S REPORTED, POTTER; YOU'LL HAVE TO BE CONTENT WITH DRIED FOODS.

NUTS!

HELLOOO... ANYONE HOME?

STRANGE ...LOOKS EMPTY...

JERRY, YOU AND TERI CHECK THE EAST QUARTERS; POTTER YOU AND FIELDS THE SOUTH; BEACHAM AND I WILL LOOK IN THE WEST WING!

CHECK!

PLACE LOOKS DESERTED...

M-M-M...

NOBODY IN THIS OFFICE--WHA-!!

MPH!!

BUT DO **YOU** APPROVE, MRS. WHEATLEY? YOU'VE HAD YOUR EYE ON ME THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE TRIP HERE TO TERRA 4. ARE YOU GOING TO DENY THAT YOU'RE ATTRACTED TO ME? WELL?

BEFORE YOU SAY ANYTHING, ASK YOURSELF IF YOU LIKED IT...

I'M DR. WHEATLEY'S ***WIFE***, MR. RHODES, IN CASE YOU'VE FORGOTTEN! I DOUBT THAT HE OR THE ***REST*** OF PROJECT ICEBERG WOULD APPROVE!

RHODES! TERI! COME QUICK!

OH GOD!

IT'S ONE OF THE SUMPTER PARTY! WHAT ***HAPPENED?***

THEY NEED US--

WAIT! I'M IN CABIN B. I'LL BE THERE ***ALL*** NIGHT... IF YOU'RE INTERESTED...

WHAT'S IT?

TAKE A LOOK FOR YOURSELF...

WHAT INDEED? TAKE A LOOK OUT THERE...

GRAVES! THE ENTIRE PARTY--ALL DEAD. BUT WHO--*HOW*--? WERE THEY TAKEN ILL?

LET'S HOPE NOT; I'D RATHER HAVE A MASS MURDERER ON MY HANDS THAN A PLAGUE. THIS IS BRINKLEY'S CABIN, LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT HIS DIARY TAPES...

...SIXTY-THIRD DAY... I BURIED FULTON THIS MORNING, HES THE LAST OF THEM. STILL HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THE CREATURE IS, WHERE IT LIVES. ONE THING FOR CERTAIN, THOUGH: IT'S *INVISIBLE*...

IS THAT ALL?

THAT'S IT. WELL CHECK THE OTHERS TAPES, BUT I'M AFRAID THIS ONE SAYS IT ALL... GENTLEMEN, WE HAVE A PROBLEM...

BUT AS THE DAYS PASSED, NOTHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY OCCURRED... WE ALL FELL INTO ROUTINE, SOON LOST OURSELVES IN WORK. IF THERE WAS AN INVISIBLE MONSTER, HE MUST HAVE GONE ELSEWHERE...

THE SEASONS ON TERRA 4 CONSISTED OF WARM SUMMERS AND BITTER WINTERS, ALTERNATING EVERY FOUR WEEKS...

...YOU... YOU HAVEN'T... HAVEN'T...

--"TRIED" ANYTHING LATELY? NO, AND I WON'T, TERI. I WANT YOU MORE THAN I'VE EVER WANTED ANY WOMAN, BUT I WANT TO BE WANTED JUST AS BADLY...

JERRY I...I...OH, GOD, KISS ME. *KISS ME!*

...DARLING...

THIS CAN'T LAST, JERRY --NOT LIKE TH.S...

NOT LIKE THIS, NO. BUT THERE ARE WAYS, DARLING, THERE ARE ALWAYS WAYS...

THYLON-D...FAST, PAINLESS, TOTALLY UNTRACEABLE... ONE LITTLE DROP IN HIS MORNING COFFEE...

OH, JERRY, I *COULDN'T!* NOT *MURDER!*

WHY NOT? HE'S MURDERING *YOU,* ISN'T HE? DAY AFTER DAY, B T BY BIT? A FULL VIBRANT WOMAN MARRED TO A STUFFY OLD LAT N SCHOLAR? IT MAKES NO SENSE! OR IS THAT WHAT YOL WANT FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?

LATIN! *LATIN!* ALL DAY LONG, ALL *NIGHT* LONG, RECLASSIFYING LOCAL PLANT LIFE IN LATIN, READING LATIN BOOKS, LISTENING TO LATIN TAPES! F I HEAR THAT WORD ONE MORE TIME I'LL SCREA--

YAGH-H-H-H!

WHAT .S IT?

F.ELDS. HE.S OUTS.DE .N THE SNOW.

FIELDS! MY GOD!!

FIELDS! FIELDS! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

HURRY! IT'S *FREEZING* OUT HERE!

FIELDS WAS IN YOUR WING, POTTER; WHAT WAS HE DOING OUTSIDE?

HE WENT TO CHECK ON THE GENERATOR. THAT WAS HIS JOB. THE CREATURE MUST HAVE CAUGHT HIM UNAWARES--GOD, IT RIPPED ALL THE FLESH FROM HIS BONES, DID YOU SEE IT?

BETTER DOUBLE LOCK ALL THE DOORS. WHATEVER THE MONSTER IS, IT MUST BE ***BIG!***

IF IT ***WAS*** A MONSTER...

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

BRINKLEY CALLED IT "INVISIBLE" ON HIS TAPE, REMEMBER? NOW AS SCIENTISTS YOU ALL KNOW THAT "INVISIBILITY" IS A PHYSICAL IMPOSSIBILITY--UNLESS WE'RE TALKING ABOUT ***SIZE!***

A DISEASE? YOU THINK THE MONSTER IS A ***GERM?***

A VIRUS THAT CAUSES THE FLESH TO JUST... ***MELT?*** THAT'S PRETTY FAR-FETCHED, DOCTOR...

■ LT350

WHATEVER THE CASE, WE DARE NOT STAY HERE ANOTHER MOMENT. POTTER, YOU AND BEACHAM DON PARKAS AND GET THE SHIP STARTED! THE REST OF YOU GET PACKED!

DISEASE, NUTHIN'! IT'S A MONSTER, ALL RIGHT, AND IT'S LURKING RIGHT OUT ***HERE*** SOMEWHERE!

SHUT UP AND KEEP MOVING!

MINUTES LATER, POTTER RETURNED...

POTTER! IS THE SHIP READY? WHERE'S BEACHAM?

SHE'S ALL SET TO GO, DOCTOR! BEACHAM'S RIGHT BEHIND ME--

IT'S BEACHAM!

LOOK AT HIM! HE'S GOIN' NUTS!

YAGHHH!

NOO! YAGHH!

HEAT RESISTANT
Latmaat product prim.

BEACHAM?

SOMETHING GOT IN-SIDE HIS COAT, ATE HIM ALIVE. IT WAS HORRIBLE?

BRING THE CORPSE AND THE PARKA TO THE LAB. I WANT TO STUDY IT.

LATER...

ANYTHING DOC?

IT'S NO GERM, I WAS WRONG ABOUT THAT. THE SKELETON IS COVERED WITH DIGESTIVE JUICES AND BLOOD OF SOME LARGE ANIMAL... PERHAPS IT *IS* INVISIBLE.

WHATEVER IT IS, IT APPEARS TO ATTACK ONLY ON THE OUTSIDE. WE'RE SAFE FOR THE MOMENT. I THINK.

BUT WHY DIDN'T THE CREATURE ATTACK IN THE SUMMER SEASON, MATT?

THAT'S RIGHT: ITS ATTACKS HAVE ALL BEEN RESTRICTED TO THE WINTERTIME HAVEN'T THEY? PERHAPS THERE'S A CLUE HERE..

YEAH? WELL I'M GONNA FINISH PACKING! YOU GUYS FIGURE OUT A SAFE WAY TO GET TO THE SHIP

YOU TWO BETTER PACK TOO! THE GEN-ERATOR IS GOING OUT-- WE'VE *GOT* TO GET TO THAT SHIP OR WE'LL *FREEZE TO DEATH!*

C'MON TER-- UH, MRS. WHEATLEY.

TER! AND I WENT TO THE SUPPLY ROOM WHILE HER HUSBAND FINISHED HIS TESTS...

OH, JERRY, I'M SCARED!

DON'T PANIC YET: YOUR HUSBAND'S A BOTANIST NOT A BIOLOGIST! HE DOESN'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS!

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IS THIS THE SUPPLY ROOM FOR THE ENTIRE COMPLEX?

AS FAR AS I KNOW, YES...

LT350

...THE CREATURE ONLY ATTACKS IN THE WINTER... AND BOTH FIELDS AND BEACHAM GOT THEIR SUPPLIES FROM THIS ROOM... H-M-M-M..

WHAT ARE YOU GETTING AT?

I'M NOT SURE...

BUT WHAT IF THE CREATURE WASN'T INVISIBLE AT ALL? WHAT IF IT HAD BEEN RIGHT HERE INSIDE THE COMPLEX WITH US ALL ALONG?..

INSIDE?

IT'S FANTASTIC... BUT IT FITS! AND IT EXPLAINS WHY THE SUMPTER PARTY NEVER SAW THE THING!--OR ***THINGS!***
YES! IT'S BEEN WITH US ALL ALONG!

JERRY WHA--??

C'MON! THERE ISN'T A MINUTE TO LOSE!

LT216

POTTER! WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

POTTER, WAIT!

TO THE SHIP. I'M GETTING OUT OF HERE NOW. YOU CAN STAY HERE WITH THAT LATIN-SPEWING OLD MAN IF YOU WANT, I'M LEAVING!

I KNOW WHERE THE CREATURE IS! IT CAN'T HARM YOU IF YOU STAY INSIDE! POTTER, ***TAKE OFF THAT PARKA!***

NUTHIN' DOIN'! I'M GETTING OUT WHILE I STILL ***CAN!***

LT217

YAGHH!

JERRY!

DON'T TOUCH HIM!

YAGH. IT'S EATING ME ALIVE!

JERRY, HELP HIM! IT'S INSIDE THE COAT!

YAGGH-MPPH!

NO... NOT INSIDE THE COAT... THE CREATURE IS THE COAT! IT'S THE FORM OF ANIMAL LIFE ON TERRA 4!

DEAR GOD! IT'S FEEDING ON HIM!

THEY LAY IN WAIT FOR US INSIDE THE STORE ROOM, LIKE SPIDERS WAITING FOR FLIES!... OR SHOULD I SAY LIKE VENUS FLYTRAPS! THEY LOOK JUST LIKE FUR-COVERED PARKAS!

IT'S (SHUDDER) AWFUL! OH, JERRY THE GENERATOR'S GONE! IT'S FREEZING IN HERE! AND IT WON'T BE WARM OUTSIDE AGAIN FOR WEEKS!

THERE MUST BE A WAY OUT OF THIS.

THERE IS!

DOC!

THE CREATURES CAN'T HARM YOU UNLESS YOU PUT THEM ON, AND THEN ONLY WHEN THEY'RE ACTIVE! THEY HAVE FOUR DORMANT PERIODS EVERY DAY, AT WHICH TIME THEY'RE NOT ONLY HARMLESS, BUT THEY'LL KEEP YOU QUITE WARM AS WELL! WARM ENOUGH TO REACH THE SHIP!

REMEMBER WHEN BEACHAM AND POTTER WENT OUT TO START UP THE SHIP? POTTER MADE IT BACK AND TOOK OFF HIS COAT BEFORE THE FIRST DORMANT PERIOD ENDED...BEACHAM WASN'T SO LUCKY.

W-WHY THE GUN, DOC?

I'VE KNOWN ABOUT YOU AND MY DEAR WIFE ALMOST AS LONG AS I'VE KNOWN ABOUT THE CREATURES...NOW PLEASE DO ME THE KINDESS OF PUTTING ON THE LATE MR. POTTER'S "COAT", WILL YOU, JERRY? I'D RATHER THIS LOOKED LIKE JUST ANOTHER ACCIDENT...

RM

LT938

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16 SQUARES

PRODUCTS CORPORATION

No.711 68

BUT ABRUPTLY...

UHH...AGH!

JERRY! WHA-WHAT'S WRONG WITH HIM?

PROBABLY SOMETHING I PUT IN HIS AFTERNOON COFFEE...

IT SAVED OUR LIVES, BUT HE TOOK THE SECRET OF THE CREATURE'S DORMANT PERIOD WITH HIM! AND WITHOUT THE WARMTH, WE'LL NEVER REACH THE SHIP ALIVE...

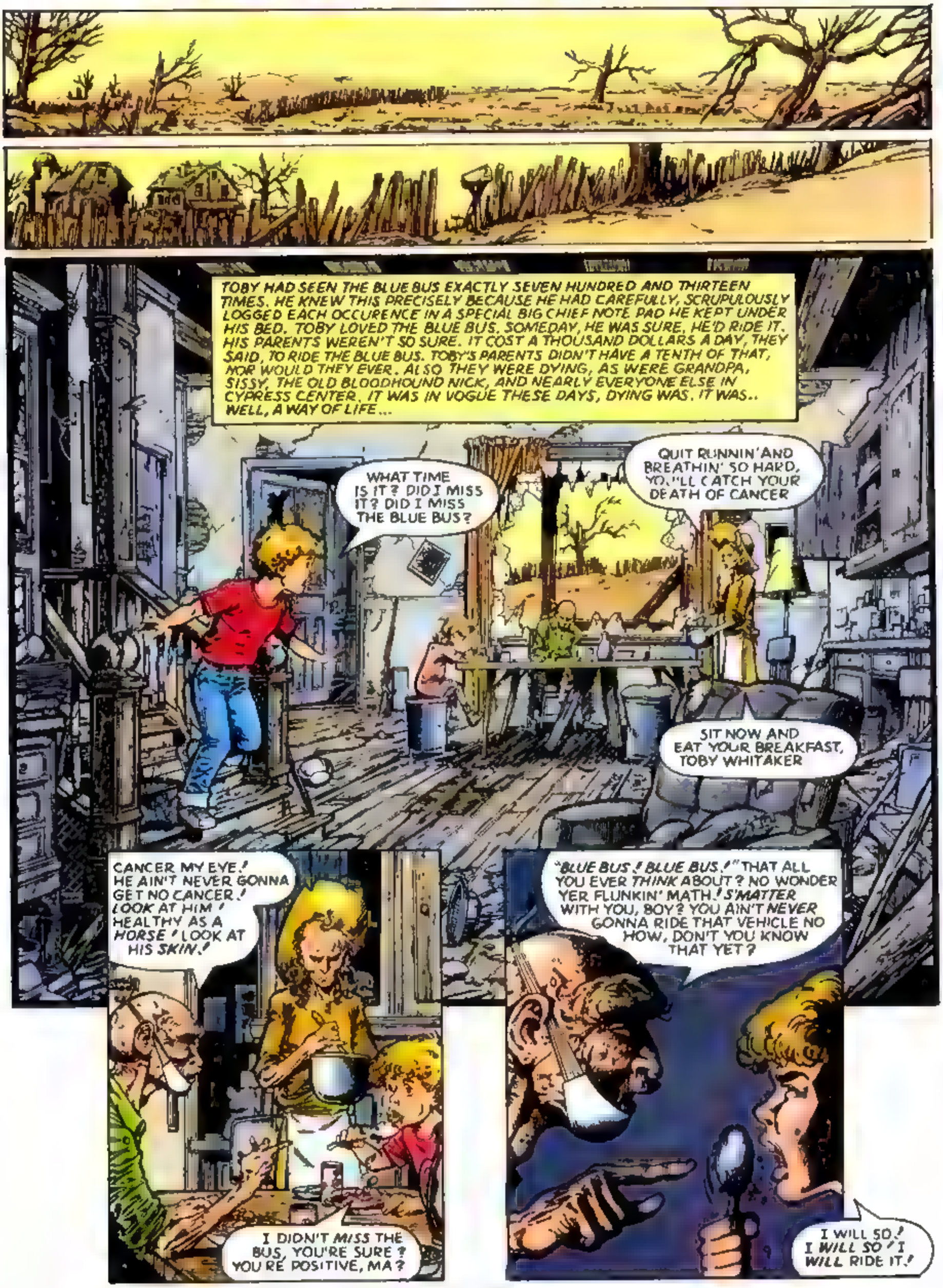
HIS DIARY! HE PUTS *EVERYTHING* IN HIS DIARY, I'VE *SEEN* HIM! JERRY, I'LL BET THE ANSWER'S IN THERE! HURRY!

THE WINDOWS ARE FROZEN OVER NOW, WE CAN'T SEE THE SHIP... TERI IS ASLEEP IN MY ARMS--FOREVER ...THE DEADLY COAT LIES NEARBY ON DR. WHEATLEY'S BUNK, RIGHT NEXT TO HIS DIARY... HIS DIARY... THE PAGES OF WHICH ARE FILLED WITH THE CREATURE'S SECRETS...

DIARY

...CAREFULLY SCRIPTED IN *ANCIENT LATIN*...

RIDE THE BLUE BUS



STORY: BRUCE JONES ART: GEORGE PEREZ

.N A PIG'S *EYE* YOU WILL.! RICH FOLKS IS ALL THET RIDES THE BUS.! WE'S POORER NOW THAN BEFORE THE WAR.!

SHET-UP ALL OF YA, N'*EAT*.!

EAT *WHAT*? THIS *PIG WALLER*? I'M GONNA GO GET ME SOME *MEAT*.! I'M GONNA GO BAG ME A PHEASANT.!

THE WILDLIFE'S ALL CONTAMINATED, PA, YOU KNOW THET..

HAH.! THAT'S A *LAUGH*.! THAT'S A *RIOT*.! WE'S *ALL* CONTAMINATED, WOMAN.! WE'S ALL GONNA DIE ANYWAY.! ALL BUT THET LITTLE TOUSLE-HAIRED RUNT THERE.!

HOW COME *HIS* HAIR AIN'T FALLIN' OUT, HUH? HOW COME HIS *GUMS* DON'T *BLEED* NONE?

THERE IT *IS*.! THERE IT IS *RIGHT* ON TIME.! I GOTTA GO.!

DUMB LITTLE JERK.!

HEY THERE.! HEY THERE WAIT FOR ME.!

HEY THERE.! HEY THERE.!

HOW 'BOUT A *RIDE*.!

IT NEVER STOPS, TOBY HOW COME YOU ALWAYS RUN OUT LIKE THIS, ANYWAY?

SOMEDAY I'LL RIDE IT, JUKE. SOMEDAY..

YOU WON'T NEVER RIDE IT NONE OF US 'ROUND HERE EVER WILL CYPRESS CENTER IS A POOR MAN'S TOWN MISS WILKES THE ENGLISH TEACHER DIED, YOU HEAR?

HI, JUKE.

CANCER, HUH? WELL...I WAS FLUNKIN' ENGLISH ANYWAY.

YOU FLUNKIN' EVERYTHING, BOY. YOU BETTER QUIT DREAMIN' 'BOUT THE BLUE BUS AND START THINKIN' 'BOUT THE *FUTURE*.

YOU LOOK WELL ENOUGH TO MEBE HAVE ONE

JUKE... YOU, YOU EVER HATE ME 'CAUSE I'M .*DIFFERENT*? 'CAUSE I GOT HAIR AND MY SKIN IS ALL SMOOTH 'N' SUCH?

NAW, I DON'T HATE YA TOBE.. I· JUS THINK IT'S WEIRD, IS ALL..

KA-CHOW!

HEY! WAS THET A GUN? IT CAME FROM *YER* PLACE!

MA! *MA!!*

MA?

DAMN OLD FOOL! COULDN'T GUT IT OUT WITH THE *REST* OF US! HAD TO GO THE COWARD'S ROUTE! NOW HOW'LL I GET THE CHORES DONE, TELL ME *THET!*

FETCH A SPADE AND CALL YER SISTER, I WON'T HAVE *FLIES* AROUND HERE !(SOB-SOB!)

TOBY, YOU *HEAR* ME? *MOVE!* PUT HIM BEHIND THE BARN NEXT TO YOUR FATHER!

--HOW COME HIS HAIR DON'T FALL OUT?...HOW COME HIS GUMS DON'T BLEED?...

THERE IT COMES! RIGHT ON *TIME!* I GOTTA GO!

TOBY WHITAKER, FINISH YER *BREAKFAST!*

HEY! HOW 'BOUT A *RIDE!!*

WHITAKER

STILL HOPIN', HUH? YER A FOOL, TOBY WHITAKER.

'LO, JUKE.

MISS CALISH THE MATH TEACHER DIED, YOU HEAR?

DON'T HARDLY PAY TO GO TO SCHOOL NO MORE...

I HEAR THE SICKNESS AIN'T SO BAD UP NORTH... TROUBLE IS, AIN'T NO TRANSPORTATION TO GET UP THERE WITH...

'CEPT THE BUS, O'COURSE.

YOU WANNA GO FISHIN' TOMORROW JUKE, 'BOUT SEVEN?

SURE. HEY--BUT WHAT ABOUT THE BLUE BUS? WON'T YOU MISS HER COMIN' THROUGH?

I AIN'T WAITIN' FOR THE BUS NO MORE, JUKE YOU WAS RIGHT.

I GOTTA START THINKIN' ABOUT TOMORROW.

S'MATTER WITH YOU, BOY, YOU SICK? HERE COMES THE BLUE BUS!

LET IT COME. I'M EATIN' MY BREAKFAST.

LAWD A'MIGHTY! LOOK HERE! IT'S STOPPED!

IT'S STOPPED RIGHT IN FRONT OF OUR PLACE! TOBY, YOU GET OUT THERE AND SEE WHAT THEY WANT!

I AIN'T PAYIN' NO MORE PROPERTY TAXES!

MASTER TOBY WHITAKER?

Y-YES SIR...

STEP IN, PLEASE...

I BELIEVE YOU REQUESTED A RIDE, SIR?

ME? *UH*. YEAH, BUT I'M-- I GOT NO *MONEY*!

IT WON'T BE NECESSARY SIT BACK, PLEASE...

T-THE *WINDOWS*... THEY'RE ALL *BLACK*!

ONLY FOR A MOMENT, SIR. ARE WE READY?

W-WHERE ARE WE *GOING*?

ON A *TOUR*, TOBY...

.. ON A CROSS-COUNTRY TOUR!

LOOK! OH, LOOK! IT'S BEAUTIFUL! IT'S CYPRESS CENTER--JUST LIKE IT USED TO BE!! THERE'S THE OLD SCHOOL HOUSE AND MR. DAWSON'S TRACTOR!

--AND THIS IS COLORADO, TOBY, THAT'S LONG'S PEAK IN THE DISTANCE.

OH, IT'S WONDERFUL! THE TREES! THE TREES!

LOOK AT ALL THE TREES!

CALIFORNIA, TOBY ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL STATES IN THE ENTIRE COUNTRY!

NO DREAM, TOBY,, BUT NOT QUITE REALITY, EITHER IT'S A LASER-HOLOGRAM, SON; EVERY WINDOW IN THE BUS IS EQUIPPED WITH A SPECIAL SCREEN AND PROJECTOR. THE INTERIOR IS CLIMATE-CONTROLLED AND SCENT FILTERED TO COORDINATE WITH EACH AREA WE DRIVE THROUGH IT'S ALL DONE BY COMPUTER, TOBY, AND IT COST MILLIONS TO BUILD..

THAT'S WHY IT COSTS SO TO RIDE THE BLUE BUS... BUT IT...IT ISN'T FAIR...

THERE'S NO FARE TO RIDE THE BLUE BUS, TOBY, ALL YOU NEED IS A STRONG, HEALTHY BODY AND THE WILL TO LIVE THERE'S A WHOLE GROUP OF OTHERS WAITING TO SEE YOU UP NORTH, SON WILL YOU JOIN US? WILL YOU HELP US REBUILD?

THE DRIVER DIDN'T ANSWER - TOBY HADN'T REALLY EXPECTED HIM TO. HE LEANED BACK AND CLOSED HIS EYES. HE TRIED NOT TO THINK AT ALL FOR A MOMENT AND IN THAT MOMENT THE GENTLE MOTION OF THE PLUSH SEAT PUT HIM TO SLEEP...

I... I'M DREAMING, ARE NT I? THIS IS ALL JUST A WONDERFUL DREAM. I'LL WAKE UP SOON...

WAR NEVER IS TOBY..BUT THE SURVIVORS MUST BAND TOGETHER, HELP OTHER SURVIVORS TO REBUILD, PUT THE COUNTRY BACK TOGETHER AGAIN.

WHAT ABOUT MA. AND SISSY?

OUTSIDE, THE BLUE BUS RUSHED PAST TREES AND GRASS AND LAKES AND PURE SWEET COUNTRY AIR...

SHALL I WAKE THE PATIENT, DOCTOR?

YES I'LL SPEAK TO HIM NOW...

CAPTAIN MURDOCK?

WH-WHAT?.. (SIGH) OH, DR WEST ARE THE TESTS OVER? HOW'D I DO?

YOU'RE *DYING*, CAPTAIN MURDOCK. THERE'S NO CURE, NO TREATMENT. YOU'VE NO IMMUNITY TO THE ALIEN DISEASE YOU'VE CONTRACTED. I'M SORRY...

I SEE.. HOW... HOW LONG DO I HAVE?

NOT LONG, I'M AFRAID EXACTLY TWO MONTHS. YOU'LL DIE AT MIDNIGHT, JANUARY 20, 2022 THESE MACHINES ARE NEVER WRONG...

NO! I'M GOING HOME... BACK TO *EARTH*.

OF COURSE, YOU'LL REMAIN WITH US UNTIL--

TO EARTH? *IMPOSSIBLE!* IT'S A *YEAR'S JOURNEY* FROM HERE! YOU'D *NEVER* REACH EARTH ALIVE!

YOU'RE WRONG. ONE YEAR FROM TODAY ROBERT SPENCER MURDOCK, ROCKETMAN, STARCLASS, WILL RETURN TO THAYERVILLE, OHIO... TO KEEP A *PROMISE*...

NOW, YOU'LL HAVE TO PARDON ME, DOCTOR. MY SHIP IS WAITING...

STORY: WILLIAM F. NOLAN ART: AL WILLIAMSON
Lettering: Ed King Coloring: Tom Luth

WILLIAM F. NOLAN'S

...AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP

Entry logbook, Starship 12 - January 29, 2022: Proceeding on schedule starcourse 89-J4. Anticipated Earth touchdown: December 31, 2022. All is well...

YOU ARE TIRED, CAPTAIN MURDOCK. YOU SHOULD REST.

REST? ON THE LAST DAY OF MY LIFE? I WANT TO SAVOR *EVERY MINUTE* LEFT TO ME!

YOU KNOW, WHEN I WAS A KID, ALL I WANTED WAS TO BE A SPACEMAN! I COULD HARDLY *WAIT* TO GET OUT HERE! MY FRIEND JACK MORGAN AND I WOULD HIKE OUT TO THE ROCKETPORT AND WATCH THE BIG PASSENGER SHIPS COME DOWN FROM THE MOON...

HERE SHE COMES, JACK! OH, ISN'T SHE A *MARVEL!*

GOSH, VEAH! SHE'S *BEAUTIFUL!*

I'LL RIDE ONE JUST LIKE HER TO THE *STARS* SOMEDAY *I'LL* BE A *SPACEMAN!*

BET YA *WON'T!*

BET I *WILL!* MY DAD AND MOM *SAID* I COULD! THEY SAID THEY'D EVEN BE *PROUD* OF ME!

GOSH.

..AND THEY *WERE* PROUD OF ME! BUT WHEN I LEFT HOME FOR THE STARS, I MADE THEM A PROMISE...

A PROMISE, SIR?

--TO COME *BACK* TO THAYERVILLE TO SEE THEM ONCE MORE. THEY'RE *WAITING* FOR ME *NOW*. AND BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T LET *ME* DOWN, I WON'T LET *THEM* DOWN!

HOW DOES THAT ANCIENT POEM BY ROBERT FROST GO? "THE WOODS ARE LOVELY, DARK AND DEEP, BUT I HAVE PROMISES TO KEEP AND M LES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP.."

BUT YOUR PARENTS-- ARE THEY NOT AWARE OF YOUR CONDITION?

THEY'RE OLD, SICK WHY BRING SORROW INTO THEIR LIVES? THEY THINK I'M COMING BACK TO THEM--

--AND I *AM!*

SIR?...

(SIGH)... YES, I KNOW... IT'S TIME (COUGH)... TIME FOR *HIM*...

GOOD EVENING, CAPTAIN MURDOCK...

YOU'RE *PERFECT!* ...MY VOICE... MY EYES... MY BODY... EVEN MY *MEMORIES*--?

--ARE *MINE*. I AM YOUR DUPLICATE IN EVERY RESPECT. ONLY EXTENSIVE LASER ANALYSIS COULD REVEAL MY ROBOTIC ORIGIN.

WHEN... WHEN YOU MEET MY PARENTS, WHAT WILL YOU DO?

FOR TWO WEEKS I SHALL BE THEIR SON, HOME FROM THE STARS... I'LL STAY WITH THEM... SLEEP IN MY OLD ROOM... TELL THEM OF MY JOURNEYS TO OTHER WORLDS...

AND... AFTER?

THEY'LL SEE ME OFF IN ANOTHER ROCKET... INTO SPACE AGAIN. THEY'LL NEVER KNOW THE TRUTH...

ARE YOU READY CAPTAIN? IT'S ALMOST MIDNIGHT...

...(COUGH) ...YES...I'M READY...

...I ALWAYS *WANTED* TO DIE IN SPACE... TO DRIFT FOREVER AMONG THE STARS...

...SO TIRED... EYES SO HEAVY...

CLOSE THEM ..SLEEP, ROBERT MURDOCK...

...GOODBYE, MOM... DAD...I LOVED YOU... LOVED YOU...

EJECT

HE'S *HERE!* OUR SON IS *HOME* AGAIN!

BOBBY'S COME *BACK* TO US!

MOM! DAD! SO GOOD TO SEE YOU!

BOBBY!

WELCOME HOME CAPTAIN MURDOCK

WELCOME HOME, CAPTAIN! THIS IS INDEED A GLORIOUS DAY FOR THAYERVILLE!

THANK YOU, SIR.

WELL... THEY VOWED THEIR SON WOULD NEVER COME HOME TO DEATH...

STILL IT SEEMS UNNATURAL TO ME

NONSENSE! IN TWO WEEKS HE'LL BE GONE, BACK IN SPACE AGAIN WHY RUIN HIS HOMECOMING? AND AFTER ALL...

THEY *ARE* PERFECT!

YES... I HAD THEM BUILT EXACTLY AS THE WILL SPECIFIED HE'LL NEVER KNOW!

YOU DID A FINE JOB... AND YOU'RE RIGHT... HE'LL *NEVER* KNOW!

Collector's Item

LAST ONE INSIDE IS A MARTIAN CANAL-HOPPER!

THERE AIN'T NO CANALS ON MARS, KENNY!

FOTCH'S CONFECTIONS

I *KNOW* THAT, DOPEY!

©84 STEACY

ANY NEW GLIM CARDS TODAY, MR. FOTCH?

NO FAIR, KENNY, YOU CAN *RUN* FASTER!

HOT DOG! A NEW BATCH OF "VENUS INVADES"!

NO FAIR! LET ME HAVE SOME!

I GOT IT! AT LAST! CARD NUMBER 27: "DISSOLVING CIVILIANS"!

WOW!

LEMME SEE! LEMME SEE IT, KENNY!

27 DISSOLVING CIVILIANS

BOY, NOW ALL I NEED IS CARD NUMBER 46: "BOMBING THE WHITEHOUSE" AND I'VE GOT THE WHOLE SET!

NO WAY, KENNY. YOU STILL HAVEN'T GOT THE FIRST CARD "THE INVASION BEGINS".

YEAH, THOSE FIRST CARDS ARE REALLY TOUGH TO FIND! I KEEP GETTING REPEATS OF THAT DUMB OLD NUMBER 14 "ROASTING THE FAMILY CAT".

I GOTTA GET HOME - MOM'S FIXIN' APPLE PIE TONIGHT, SEE YA!

ALMOST TIME FOR SUPPER, SON! WHAT'S THAT YOU'VE GOT THERE?

KEEP OUT!

MY **VENUS INVADES** COLLECTION, DAD... I KEEP THEM UNDER ACETATE SO THE DUST WON'T GET TO THEM.

GOOD LORD! THAT'S A GRUESOME PIECE OF WORK! WHO PUTS THESE THINGS OUT, ANYWAY?

NEAT, HUH, DAD?

DOES YOUR MOTHER KNOW ABOUT THIS?

YOU WOULDN'T SNITCH, WOULD YA DAD? SHE'D **KILL** ME!

FRED! KENNY! SUPPER'S ON!

31 VENUSIAN FOOD

NOT SO FAST, DEAR- **CHEW** YOUR FOOD!

GOTTA GET DOWN TO MR. FOTCH'S STORE BEFORE SIX! HE'S SUPPOSED TO GET A NEW BATCH OF CARDS IN AND PETE MIGHT BEAT ME!

NO FAIR, KENNY! YOU GOT A SCHWINN!

SO TELL YER OLD MAN YER TROUBLES, NOT ME!

HOW 'BOUT IT, MR. FOTCH? ANY **NEW** ONES?

OVER THERE...

I GOT IT! I GOT IT! "BOMBING THE WHITEHOUSE"!

LEMME SEE! LEMME SEE IT!

46

BOMBING THE WHITEHOUSE

BOY... THAT'S KEEN!...

NOW ALL I NEED IS THAT FIRST CARD- "THE INVASION BEGINS" AND I'VE GOT 'EM ALL! MAN OH MAN! HOT DOG!

ALL STARS

WHEN'S THE NEXT BATCH IN, MR FOTCH?

DAY OR TWO...

NO FAIR, KENNY! YOU **ALWAYS** GET FIRST DIBS!

I'M GONNA ***BEAT*** YA THIS TIME, KENNY! ***I'M*** GONNA GET THAT FIRST CARD!

NO WAY, PETE, YER JUST TOO SLOW ON THE DRAW!

GEE.. WHAT IF PETE ***DOES*** BEAT ME TO IT... I COULD NEVER ***LIVE*** WITH MYSELF! I'D RATHER ***DIE*** THAN NOT GET THAT FIRST CARD...

... I GOTTA HAVE THAT FIRST CARD. IF PETE BEATS ME TO IT, I'LL NEVER LIVE IT DOWN!

THERE'S **ONE** WAY TO MAKE SURE **I** GET THERE FIRST!

MR FOTCH OPENS AT EGHT I THINK... I CAN STILL MAKE IT BACK TO THE HOUSE BEFORE BREAKFAST!...

.. HEY!... THAT'S FUNNY!... THE CANDY STORE **DOOR'S** OPEN...

CONFECTIONER

MR FOTCH?... YOU IN HERE?...

VENUS INVADES!

HEY... A **NEW** BOX OF GUM CARDS! MUST'VE **JUST** COME IN!

I **GOT** IT! THE **FIRST** CARD! IT'S...

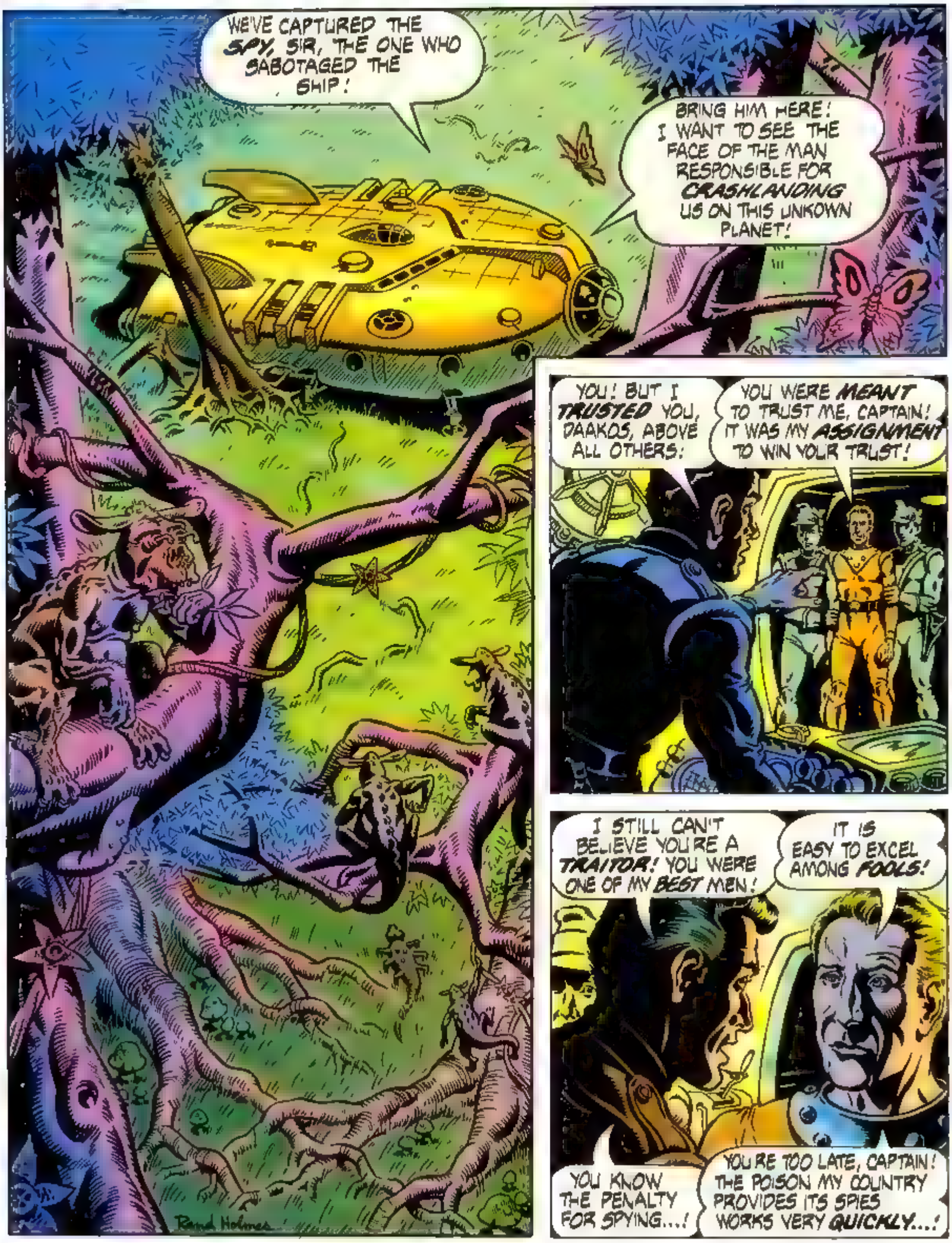
.. MR FOTCH? THAT YOU? I...

AAAAAG-H!

1

THE INVASION BEGINS

STONEY END


WE'VE CAPTURED THE SPY, SIR, THE ONE WHO SABOTAGED THE SHIP!
BRING HIM HERE! I WANT TO SEE THE FACE OF THE MAN RESPONSIBLE FOR CRASHLANDING US ON THIS UNKOWN PLANET!
YOU! BUT I TRUSTED YOU, DAAKOS, ABOVE ALL OTHERS!
YOU WERE MEANT TO TRUST ME, CAPTAIN! IT WAS MY ASSIGNMENT TO WIN YOUR TRUST!
I STILL CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE A TRAITOR! YOU WERE ONE OF MY BEST MEN!
IT IS EASY TO EXCEL AMONG FOOLS!
YOU KNOW THE PENALTY FOR SPYING...!
YOU'RE TOO LATE, CAPTAIN! THE POISON MY COUNTRY PROVIDES ITS SPIES WORKS VERY QUICKLY...!
Rand Holmes

CAPTAIN! COME HERE...QUICKLY! LOOK!

ONCE THOSE VINES GET HOLD OF THE SHIP, WE'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO BLAST FREE! WE HAVE TO GET THEM OFF!

BUT... HOW?!

TELL O'BRIEN TO DIVERT ELECTRICAL POWER TO THE HULL! WE'LL FRY THOSE VINES OFF!

YES, SIR!

IT'S WORKING!

WE'RE NOT OUT OF THE WOODS YET! WE STILL HAVE TO...

...HOLY COW! I DON'T BELIEVE MY EYES!

FZZT

ZZT

ZZT

ZZT

THAT GIRL DOESN'T STAND A CHANCE AGAINST THOSE BEASTS! I'M GOING OUT THERE!

CAPTAIN... YOU CAN'T RISK YOUR LIFE FOR SOME ALIEN!

WATCH ME!

O'BRIEN! HOW MUCH LONGER UNTIL THE ENGINE'S FIXED?

SHE'S IN BAD SHAPE, CAPTAIN—I'M HAVING TO JERRY-RIG!

I'D SAY... THIRTY MINUTES AT LEAST!

MAKE IT FIFTEEN!

RUN FOR THOSE ROCKS! WE CAN HOLD THEM OFF FROM THERE!

CLICK CLICK CLICK

DARN IT...I'VE FIRED MY LAST BLAST! WE'RE DONE FOR!

I'M DEEPLY GRATEFUL, CAPTAIN! FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH—I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YOU!

ME TOO, HONEY... ME TOO!

LOOK!

WE'RE SAVED!

EXCUSE ME, CAPTAIN-- HERE HE IS...

THIS IS **DONALDSON,** SIR. WE FOUND HIM IN THE PARTS ROOM... SOBBING.

I PUT DOWN MY COPY OF **WONDERFUL PLANET STORIES** AND LOOKED AT THE SORRY PIECE OF MEAT NAMED "DONALDSON."

DONALDSON'S IN CHARGE OF THE METEOR SHIELDS. NEAR AS WE CAN FIGURE, HE'S BEEN ON HALLUCINOGENS FOR THE LAST SEVENTY-TWO HOURS.

SO, YOU'RE THE BASTARD RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS MESS!

IT'S NOT **MY** FAULT, SIR! THE SHIELDS WERE ON "AUTOMATIC"-- IF THE **COMPUTER** HADN'T GONE DOWN!

I KNEW HE'D TRY TO WEASEL OUT OF IT. I'D CITED HIM FOR DERELICTION OF DUTY BEFORE. HE WAS ON DOUBLE PROBATION ALREADY. I'D BEEN A FOOL TO TRUST HIM.

SAVE YOUR STINKING EXCUSES! IT **IS** YOUR FAULT WE'RE STUCK ON THIS MUDHOLE! YOUR LITTLE DRUG ORGY'S CONDEMNED THIRTY MEN TO **DEATH!**

BUT I DIDN'T MEAN IT, SIR! I DIDN'T KNOW **THIS** WOULD HAPPEN!

CREWMAN DONALDSON, I ORDER YOU CONFINED TO QUARTERS FOR TWO HOURS.

NO! **NO!** I'LL **DIE** IF YOU LOCK ME UP!

NO! I'LL DIE! IT ISN'T FAIR! IT ISN'T FAIR!

IS HE RIGHT, BIGGERS? **IS** TWO HOURS A DEATH SENTENCE?

EASILY. BEST ESTIMATES HAVE IT-- LESS THAN AN HOUR UNTIL THE WORMS BREAK THROUGH THE HULL. THEN... WELL, STONEWALL'S BRINGING THE FULL REPORT.

IF WE COULD BOTTLE THAT ACID OF THEIRS AND SELL IT BACK ON EARTH, WE'D MAKE A FORTUNE. I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT.

AND THE GENERATOR'S GONE FOR GOOD? NO HOPE OF REPAIRING IT?

NONE. WE BURNED IT OUT TRYING TO ELECTRIFY THE HULL.

THAT WAS WHEN STONEY MADE HIS BIG ENTRANCE. IT'S FUNNY WHAT A KNOWLEDGE OF CERTAIN DEATH WILL BRING OUT IN A PERSON. IN STONEY'S CASE, I WASN'T TOO SURPRISED.

WOOO-EEE! WOULD YOU LOOK AT *THAT*! HOT-CHA-CHA!

GOT THAT REPORT FOR US, STONEY?

REPORT: MIDSHIPMAN FRANKLIN "STONEY" STONEWALL HAS ABANDONED THE SAFETY OF HIS CLOSET TO CONFRONT DEATH WOMAN-TO-WOMAN. "IF I MUST DIE," HE...EXCUSE ME... *SHE* SAYS, "LET IT BE WITH DIGNITY!"

AND WHAT ABOUT THE *ATMOSPHERE*, STONEY? CAN WE BREATHE OUT THERE?

NOT UNLESS YOU WERE RAISED ON FLUORINE GAS, CAPTAIN. AS SOON AS *THAT* STUFF STARTS SEEPING THROUGH, WE ALL BITE THE BIG ONE.

MIGHT AS WELL SEE HOW NISHIMURA'S DOING WITH THE ENGINE. YOU NEVER KNOW... MAYBE WE'LL GET A BREAK.

JESUS, STONEY--GAY'S ONE THING, BUT D'D YOU HAVE TO GO *FAIRY PRINCESS* ON US?

SEXIST.

ENGINE CASING'S SHOT--NEED A NEW ONE. HAD TO DUMP THE FUEL BEFORE WE CRASHED OR BLOW OURSELVES UP. CONTROL SYSTEM'S OUT--CAN'T JERRY-RIG MICROCHIPS, CAPTAIN. ANY OTHER DUMB QUESTIONS? YOU'RE PUTTING ME OFF MY GAME.

ENGINE'S SHOT. WE'RE ON BATTERY POWER. EVEN IF WE *DID* GET THE WORMS OFF, WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH POWER TO RUN THE OXYGEN REGENERATOR FOREVER.

AND STONEY'S GONE QUEER ON ME. WHAT NEXT?

AIR LOCK

SHRUM

THE WORMS! THEY'VE BURNED THEIR WAY THROUGH!

LOCK

ALL HANDS TO THE AIRLOCK! THE WORMS HAVE BURNED THROUGH THE HULL! THE OUTSIDE ATMOSPHERE IS *POISONOUS!* ALL HANDS REPORT TO THE AIRLOCK AND *SUIT UP!*

THERE'S A ROCKY OUTCROPPING ABOUT 300 YARDS AWAY, STRAIGHT OUT THE HATCH. OUR LAND VEHICLES WOULD NEVER MAKE IT THROUGH THE MUCK--JUST HIT THE MUD AND RUN LIKE HELL.

IT WAS A DESPERATE PLOY. THE WORMS WOULD BE ATTRACTED TO OUR METAL SUITS JUST AS THEY WERE TO THE SHIP'S HULL. DIFFERENCE WAS, THEY'D BURN THROUGH OUR SUITS IN *SECONDS.*

GO FOR IT!!!

AAARRGH...BURNING THROUGH! *COUGH COUGH*

YEEAAGH!

AAAGGHH!

CHOKE!

I DIDN'T LOOK BACK TO SEE HOW THE OTHERS WERE DOING. I COULD HEAR THEIR SCREAMS OVER THE HELMET RADIOS, BUT I COULDN'T DISTINGUISH VOICES.

BY THE TIME I REACHED THE ROCKS, ONLY TWO OF US WERE STILL ON THE AIR.

THIS IS CAPTAIN SHRUM--I'M CLEAR. WILL YOU MAKE IT?

I...THINK SO.

THANKS, CAPTAIN.

ANYTIME... STONEY.

YOU THINK THEY'LL CLIMB UP HERE AFTER US?

DOESN'T LOOK LIKE IT. I THINK WE'RE SAFE. FOR NOW.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE RUN OUT OF OXYGEN IN OUR SUITS? WHAT DO WE DO THEN?

THEN... WE DIE, STONEY.

HOW LONG DO WE HAVE?

ABOUT HALF AN HOUR, GIVE OR TAKE.

HALF AN HOUR.

I DON'T REMEMBER SEEING NISHIMURA. DID HE EVEN SUIT UP?

NO. HE AND GRISSON WERE STILL PLAYING CHESS WHEN WE ABANDONED SHIP.

SUDDENLY I REMEMBERED ***WONDERFUL PLANET STORIES***. I HADN'T HAD A CHANCE TO FINISH IT. I PULLED IT OUT OF MY SUIT POCKET.

WHAT'S THAT?

JUST A COMIC BOOK. A WAY TO PASS THE TIME.

CAN I READ IT WHEN YOU'RE THROUGH?

SURE.

IS IT...OKAY TO LAY MY HEAD HERE? I WON'T IF YOU DON'T WANT ME TO.

WELL, I...UH ...*COUGH*...

OH, HELL- WHY NOT?

I MEAN, AT THIS POINT, WHAT DID I HAVE TO LOSE?

YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, CAPTAIN. I'VE THOUGHT THAT...FOR A LONG TIME.

I SHOULDN'T SAY THIS, I KNOW, BUT... OR WHATEVER IT'S WORTH...

...I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YOU, CAPTAIN.

ME TOO, STONEY...ME TOO.

THE END

SPECIAL

3-D

ISSUE

CHIODO

I SAT IN THE COCKPIT OF OUR LITTLE SPACE SHIP HOLDING UP THE PICTURE OF BRICK. I STARED LOVINGLY AT THE STRONG, CHISELED FEATURES, THE WIDE, POWERFUL

GREEN TROPICAL PLANET BELOW AND SIGHED RESIGNEDLY...

HELLO, YOU BIG BEAUTIFUL HUNK OF MALE CHAUVINIST, YOU...

I THOUGHT BACK TO THE TIME BRICK AND I HAD FIRST LANDED ON THE LITTLE FOREST PLANET...OUR "HONEYMOON HOM

OH, BRICK!

YEAH, IT'S A BEAUT ALL RIGHT. AND WAIT'LL YOU SEE THE *BIG GAME!*

BRICK! E-E-E-E-E!

THAT'S JUST ONE OF THE *SMALLER* ONES, CONNIE BABY, THERE'S *PLENTY*

DARLING, HOW CAN WE *LIVE*

BUT THAT WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING... ON EARTH BRICK HAD APPEARED THE PERFECT, CULTURED GENTLEMAN...BUT HERE ON THE LITTLE TROPICAL WORLD...

BRICK WAS, LIKE A KID WITH A TOY RIFLE... I WAS BEYOND

"MALE CHAUVINIST PIG"... BRICK? THAT'S *YOU*!

NO, YOU LOVE BEING *WAITED* ON. YOU LOVE FLEXING YOUR

IT WAS HARD AT FIRST, BUT WE LEARNED, BRICK AND I...WE LEARNED *TOGETHER*...

FIELD TRIP

THE BOYS ARE ALMOST HERE...I'VE HOW MANY TO WATCH WORLD WAR II IS OVER...

...S THAN OR WOULD YOU HAVE PREFERRED THE NAZIS HAD WON? I DON'T THINK YOUR GREAT GREAT GRANDADDY WOULD HAVE AGREED.

PROUD OF THE BATTALIONS. FROLD.

...INDIFFERENT. I'M BORED. AND YOU KNOW WHAT? SO AM I...

I'LL SEE IF I CAN ARRANGE TO HAVE THE PRESIDENT START A SMALL THERMO-NUCLEAR WAR FOR YOU SOMEWHERE ELSE!

STORY: BRUCE JONES

ART: JOHN BOLTON

3-D PROCESS: RAY ZONE

HEY... YOU'RE SERIOUS, AREN'T YOU?

I'M NOT DENYING THAT WAR WAS TERRIBLE. BUT AT LEAST WE HAD A *CHOICE* BACK THEN. THERE'S NO CHOICE NOW. NOT IN THE PUSHBUTTON AGE. WE LIVE IN PEACE SURE BUT ONLY BECAUSE WE'RE FORCED TO... TERRIFIED

I KNOW WHAT IT MEANS MAN

WHY DO WE DO (IT, PAT? WHY BOTHER?) THERE'LL NEVER BE ANOTHER WAR--NOT A *GROUND* WAR ANYWAY...

THERE'S STILL THE POSSIBILITY OF HOSTILE *ALIEN* LIFE, MAX--GOT TO STAY IN *SHAPE!* THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR GOOD TRAINING.

THERE'S *ONE* SUBSTITUTE PAT...

GENTLEMEN, THIS IS MAJOR JACKMAN. HE'LL BE YOUR INSTRUCTOR FOR YOUR FINAL PHASE OF TRAINING: *FIELD ACTION EXERCISE.* WE DEPART FOR THE PLANET SRAN AT 0600. MAJOR JACKMAN?

GOOD AFTERNOON, GENTLEMEN...

A TOAST GENTLEMEN! MAY YOU ALL COME BACK

AND ONE MORE TOAST AS WAY BE GREAT

INTO HYPER-DRIVE UNTIL THEY RE PASSED BRADSHAW.

THAT CAN FIGHT FOR COMBAT.

AS MOST OF YOU KNOW THE ENEMY CONSISTS OF A PLATOON OF HIGHLY

REAL BUT NO ONE WILL ACTUALLY BE HURT.

EASY PHILLIPS
T S ONLY *DRUG-INDUCED*
MAGERY-- BUT THIS W LL
SHOW YOU WHAT CAN
HAPPEN WHEN--

AHH!

TAKE CAREFUL
AIM, MEN, AND--
CHOKE, *PETERSON!*

WE'VE *ROUTED*
THEM, MAJOR--FOR
NOW.

M-MUST BE SOME FOUL-UP IN THE NAVIGATIONICS--

TO MY SENSORS, SIR, THIS IS *NOT* SRIAN 7! WE'RE TWO PARSECS

MUST HAVE *MISCALCULATED* WHEN WE WARPED BACK!!!!

ALL RIGHT, HERE T

FEDERATION SOIL. THAT MEANS THE ENEMY, GENTLEMEN, S *REAL*! THIS IS *NOT* A DRILL.

--YOU'RE JUST *SAYING* THAT TO MAKE IT MORE

I, D--EKK!

ARMSTRONG!

YOUR *TRAINING!*

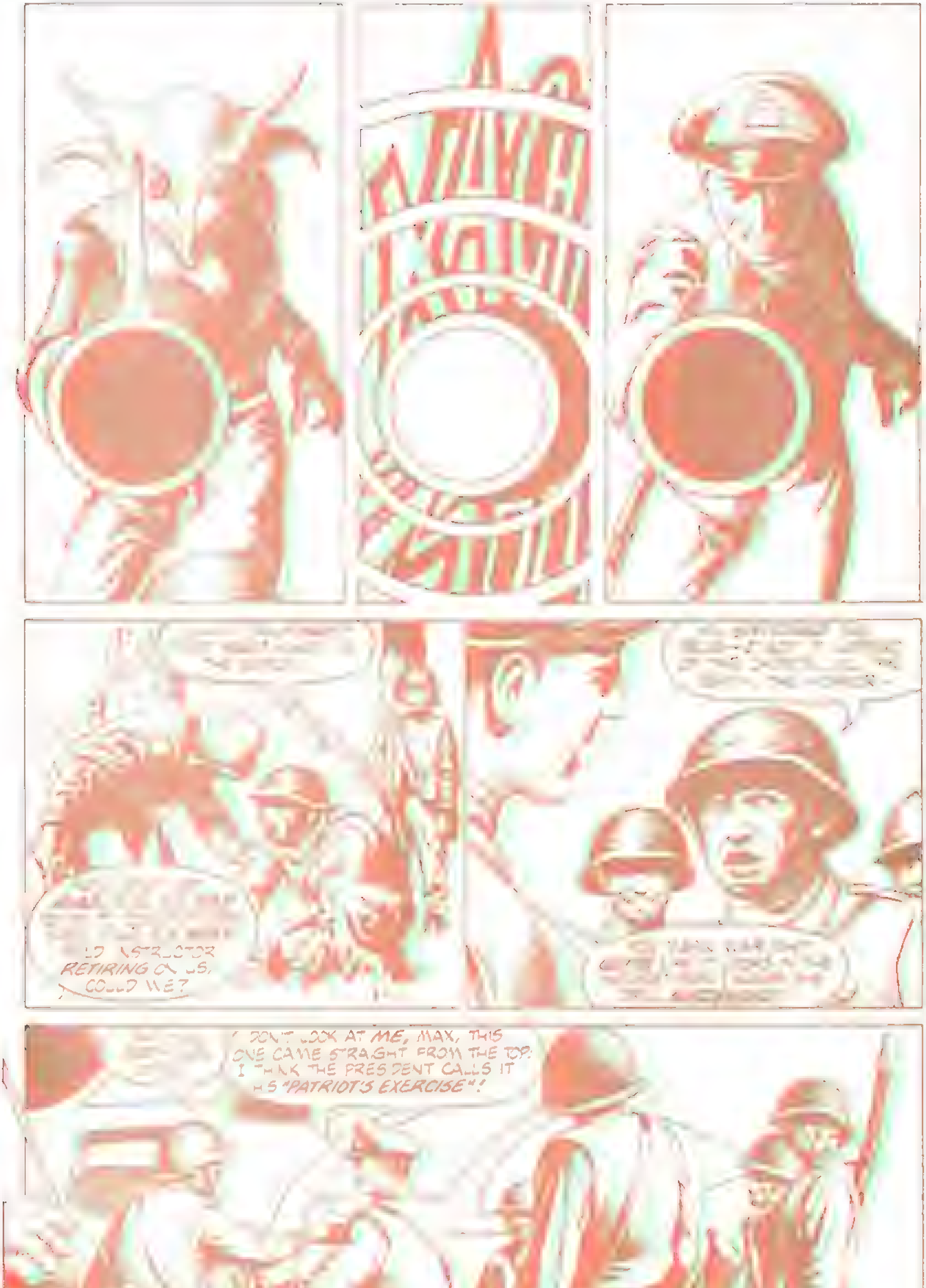
STE NER;
ET BACK HERE.

THERE SHE IS, BOYS. ALL RGHT I'LL GO FRST AND--

MINE.

AMBUSH! MAJOR--UK!

...T-THIS (GULP) THIS S IT... REALLY


INSTRUCTOR RETIRING ON US, COULD WE?
DON'T LOOK AT *ME*, MAX, THIS ONE CAME STRAIGHT FROM THE TOP. I THINK THE PRESIDENT CALLS IT HIS *"PATRIOT'S EXERCISE"*!

GIFTS

...OU RE SURE THE FEDERATION DEEMS IT NECESSARY, ZHAN? I DO HATE KILLING SO

THE PLANET CANNOT E OLVE WITHOLIT IT, FHAN

BAM!

ALL THE GREAT REPTILES N THIS QUADRANT OTHER FEDERATION MARKSMEN AKE EL MINAT.NG S M AR SPEC ES N OTHER

THE BIG SAURIANS HAVE BECOME *TOO* SUCCESSFUL, FHAN... THE SMALLER MAMMALS THE *INTELLIGENT* L FE-W LL NEVER GAIN A FOOT-HO.D W.TH THESE MONSTROSITIES AROUND..

WOOM!

I'M IN A MILLION-YEAR RUT.

MY SENSOR S THE A R

THESE TIRESOME HELMETS! I'M HOT!

WORLD FHAN. I'LL NOT HAVE MY BR DE BREATHING STRANGE MICROBES AND BECOMING S CK ON OUR WED.NG

WHERE ARE THESE "MAMMAL" THINGS WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE THE SALVATION OF?

THEY'RE ABOUT SMALL TIMID.

RAUGH!

MY! THERE'S A HEALTHY SPECIMEN

THIS IS WHAT THE SENSOR SAYS THE "MAMMALS" WILL EVOLVE INTO-- AREN'T THEY SILLY.

PLAYING WITH

YES BE CAREFUL, THEY'RE

SPACEMAN GO HOME!

THE LOUD, CONTINUOUS BEEPING SOUND AWAKENED H.M. HE HAD BEEN NESTLED COMFORTABLY IN H.S SHOCK COUCH. SLEEPING OR DAYDREAMING, HE WASN'T SURE WHICH. THE SHIP'S WARNING SIGNAL SLICED INTO H.S REVERIE AND BROUGHT H.M TO HIS FEET. THE RED ALERT LIGHT WAS FLASHING, SPRAYING ITS CRIMSON GLOW ACROSS THE INSTRUMENT CONSOLE. HE LOOKED AT THE DIALS...THEY WERE

GYRO'S GONE *HAYWIRE*-- WE'RE SWINGING OFF COURSE! WHAT *IS* THIS, ANYWAY...?

DAMN! BOTH BOOSTERS FIRED AND WE DON'T MOVE AN *INCH!* WE'RE BEING DRAGGED INTO THE PLANET'S ATMOSPHERE BY SOME INCREDIBLE FORCE!

I STOP THE FORCE--*TOO POWERFUL!* BEST I CAN DO IS TRY TO *LEVAL* THE SHIP ENOUGH TO *PANCAKE* HER IN!

KA-RUNCH

...(GROAN)... HULL'S SPLIT... AIR ESCAPING... GOT TO GET INTO MY (GROAN) SUIT...

GREAT! JUST GREAT! A BILLION MILES FROM [illegible]

WELL, IF SHE DOESN'T BLOW UP IN THE NEXT FEW MINUTES, I'LL CHECK THE RADIO AND TRY TO PUT IN AN EMERGENCY CALL TO--TO--

--TO WHOM? W-WHERE DID I COME FROM? W-WHA--SAY, I CAN'T REMEMBER [illegible]

LOST IN THE VOID AND I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHO THE [illegible]

HM-M...DOESN'T LOOK ESPECALLY *ALIEN*... STANDARD COMPUTER

BETTER YET: WHO *DROPPED* IT? SOMEBODY LIVING HERE OR SOMBODY *VISITING?*

HOW MAY I SERVE YOU?

A *HUMAN!* THANK GOD! AND I THOUGHT I WAS *STRANDED!*

WOW, WHAT A FIGURE!

"SERVE"? (HEH-HEH!) YOU SHOULD WATCH WHO YOU *SAY* THAT TO,

SHALL I REMOVE MY CLOTHING FOR RECREATION OR WOULD YOU LIKE FOR ME TO *SING?* I KNOW 27 DIFFERENT GALACTIC LANGUAGES AND THEIR VARIOUS SUB-TONGUES...

WELL, LETA SEE...WHY DON'T START WITH A FRENDLY LITTLE *KISS?* IMPROVE INTERGALACTIC RELATIONS -- *HEY!*

I'M NOT PROGRAMMED FOR *DIMENSIONAL CONTACT.* YOU NEED A *Y-37 MODEL.* PLEASE PUSH THE BUTTONS PLEASE...

THE BUTTONS?

SAY, WHAT'S YOUR *NAME,* SUGAR?

HEY-HEY LETA *WAIT!* WHERE THE DEVIL--

"PUSH THE BUTTONS", HUH? YEAH, SURE, BUT WHICH BUTTONS, HOW MANY TIMES...?

A-ARE YOU AS REAL AS ANY

HOT DAMN! HOW LONG HAS THIS BEEN GLADE AND A COOL

YES? WHY DON'T

IT WORKED! IT WORKED!

OF COURSE IT WORKED, NOW WHY DON'T

OKAY, BABY, NOW W DO I GET THE

..."TWO UPPER LEFT, AND FOUR LOWER--" OOPS! PUSHED FIVE...

RAUGH!

GEEZ...YA GOTTA BE CAREFUL WITH THIS THING!...

THAT--THEY'RE VANISHING!

REMOVE MY CLOTHES AND--

LATER! RIGHT NOW

MOMENTS LATER...

I WHISTLE UP SOME REPAIR-ROBS FOR MY SHIP, SWEETIE?

ONE MIDDLE

RIGHT...

HEY, THAT'S PERFECT! OKAY YOU GUYS, GET TO IT! I WANT A BRAND NEW LITTLE STAR OBSERVATION DECK!

THIS MIGHT TAKE AWHILE, BABE. WHY DON'T YOU AND I GET COMFORTABLE?

HE SWALLOWED THICKLY, A COLD LUMP OF FEAR FORMING IN HIS STOMACH, A FILM OF PERSPIRATION DOTTING HIS BROW...

YOU WILL TURN OVER

HUH? THIS THING?

I'M AFRAID THAT'S GOVERNMENT PROPERTY... AND YOU'RE ABUSING IT RATHER SEVERLY.

IN YOUR OPINION, MAYBE... HOW'D YOU LIKE A PURPLE-EYED DRAGON DOING A TAP ON YOUR SH'

I'VE NEUTRALIZED THE CYLOX... YOUR WEAPON AS WELL. NOW IF YOU DON'T MIND WE'LL BEGIN CLEANING UP SOME OF YOUR...ER, HANDIWORK!

HEY, THAT'S MY BRUNETTE! WE WEREN'T FINISHED!

SIX YEARS WE'VE BEEN SEARCHING FOR THIS MODEL--A SCIENTIST FROM ALPHA-7 MISPLACED IT BEFORE WE LEARNED IT WAS DISFUNCTIONAL.

...IONAL"?

ORIGINALLY THEY WERE INTENDED AS HARMLESS [redacted] DEVICES, FOR USE BY TRUCKERS AND PEOPLE ISOLATED FROM HUMANITY FOR SEVERAL YEARS. THEY CAN REPRODUCE VIRTUALLY ANY THREE-DIMENSIONAL OBJECT FOR PERIODS OF UP TO 24 HOURS.

YOU'RE TELLING ME!

LOOK, DISFUNCTIONAL OR NOT, THAT'S THE GREATEST LITTLE GADGET I'VE EVER SEEN IN MY LIFE! JUST TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT FOR IT, PAL, AND I'LL--

I--THAT IS--I SEEM TO HAVE DEVELOPED A SLIGHT CASE OF AMNESIA... BUT I MUST HAVE MONEY, LOOK AT THAT SPACE SKIMMER--

THE CYLOX IS FLAWED, YOU SEE, FATALY. AT LEAST THIS MODEL IS...

WE USE THE TERM "OVER-EDUCATED" IN DESCRIBING THESE PROTOTYPES. THEY WERE "SMARTER" THEN THEY NEEDED TO BE...SO SMART THAT THEY BEGAN TO CREATE ON THEIR OWN... WITHOUT ANYONE HAVING TOUCHED THEIR BUTTONS...

HEY! THAT'S MY SPACE SKIMMER! WHAT'RE YOU--

--WAIT A MINUTE... HOW COULD THE CYLOX DO THAT?...IT DIDN'T CREATE THE SHIP, I FLEW IT HERE...I...

SOME OF THE CYLOX'S "CREATIONS" BECAME QUITE SOPHISTICATED, QUITE COMPLEX...LIKE "CHILDREN" CREATED BY A MACHINE. AND LIKE ALL NEWBORN THINGS, THEY HAD NO KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR PASTS... WHO THEY WERE...

THE PROBLEM WAS, THEY COULD NEVER WANDER VERY FAR FROM THE ELECTRO-MAGNETIC FIELD OF THE CYLOX FROM WHICH THEY DERIVED THEIR POWER...ALWAYS IT PULLED THEM BACK...LIKE A MOTHER REPRIMANDING A CHILD...

...OH MY GOD...

...'OVER-EDUCATED"...THAT WAS THE PROBLEM...

HE LOOKED UP ABRUPTLY, A BRIGHT GLARE OF MOVEMENT CATCHING HIS EYE...

HE SWALLOWED THICKLY, A COLD LUMP OF FEAR FORMING IN HIS STOMACH, A FILM OF PERSPIRATION DOTTING HIS BROW...

...NO...

YOU WILL TURN OVER THE CYLOX, PLEASE...

ALIEN WORLDS

TACTIC